

# Fellow Mortals

Issue No. 3  
Winter '93



**Wildlife Rehabilitation**

*"Fellow Mortals is not a place. It can exist in a place, but it is a living philosophy and, though that philosophy was born in our hearts, it lives because of you."*

## INTO THE MYSTERY

BY YVONNE WALLACE BLANE

Arthur stretched long hind legs until they were taut under russet fur, wriggled his ears experimentally for voices and, hearing none, laid his flat chin on the carpet of — grass! What was this? He had fallen asleep under his humans' bed; he was sure of it. He hadn't been feeling well, legs stiff and eyes dim, all he remembered was the dream of running lap after lap through endless fields of clover, dandelion and daisy — truly a cottontail's heaven.

Opening his eyes slowly so that bright brown shown only slightly through slitted lids, he looked out at the landscape. No carpet of brown fiber here, no box springs

above, all was emerald grass and deep blue sky, and the most wonderful pure light of a warm yellow sun that tickled his whiskers without making him shiver.

In fact, everything was fine; no thistles to poke his tender paws when he hopped to a dandelion, no uncomfortable heat, no doors, no walls, no fences, no end to the perfect world that lay all around him.



The sun followed an arc over the verdant field, as it should, for what would heaven be to a rabbit were it to lack the friendly cover and mysteries of night?

With darkness, a special remembering came into Arthur's heart. And his first fear. Night had been his time with family, but it also brought the night tigers — great winged creatures so silent and powerful that cottontails had disappeared from their friends' midst without time even to scream.

His heart raced faster as he sought cover — and found it unexpectedly under a canopy of soft pine boughs — where he hadn't noticed a tree before.

And none too soon had he sheltered there! For two globes of golden light observed him from another tree nearby, a soft "whoop whoop-whoop-whoop whoop" but a whisper where a deep trembling of the air could have been.

"You are the named-one 'Arthur!'"

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the Great Horned Owl hooted. Not the enquiry one might have expected from the lord of the night, but a statement. "I am an emissary of the ancient white-tail and am sent by the predators to bring you into our midst."

Arthur knew non-humans could talk, of course, all but the humans knew that, but he had never been addressed congenially by a predator before, except for Princess, his first and dearest companion, a canine who had died when he was only two years old.

Now, startled, he kept still as a rock and as silent, and waited for the trap to spring. "Sure," he thought, "you want to bring me into the midst of your stomach." He felt the warmth race up the veins in his ears, his heart pounding like a bumblebee caught in a spider's web.

The stout branch creaked under the weight of the owl as it changed footing — long sharp talons curling deep into the bark.

"Were you not named in the First World?" the owl demanded deeply, commanding a timid "Yes," from Arthur.

"Then come," and soft-edged feathers on supple broad wings lifted the great bird into the night. No scars were left on the branch where talons had gripped so fiercely moments before.

Feeling that he was about to make a terrible mistake, but having no alternative, Arthur hopped out from under the pine boughs into the open, whiskers trembling along with everything else as he looked up, down and sideways for danger. All he saw was the light of the moon spilling a silver trail into the wood.

Hind-feet first, Arthur ran faster and faster, not remembering stiff legs, tired eyes, weak heart. Fully mature and in his prime, he entered the heart of the wood.

But what was this? Deep grass could not lessen the height of the wolves who panted on his left, ears pricked at the sound of the grass folding under his soft feet, nor the great heads of the bear who flanked him on the right, nostrils flaring at his scent. He was in the predators' midst all right, in the midst of dinner preparations!

Gliding to land on a fallen tree, the Great Horned Owl was joined by a multitude of other owls, hooting and shrilling and moaning a tapestry of night noise.

And then a whining, a familiar whining, dimly remembered from his youth.

Arthur turned and saw the golden coat and limpid brown eyes and felt the warm breath.

"Princess!" his soft eyes grew round in wonder and he stood up so very high on his hind legs so that he could touch her nose with his own. It was all right. They weren't going to eat him after all.

He was Home.

It was February 21, when Arthur first awoke and was Home. Perfect spring became perfect summer became perfect fall. It was late December now and there was a change coming in this world. He could feel it in the excitement of the wolves who, never hungry, played tag faster and harder and longer. He could feel it in the wingbeats of the owls who went deeper and further into the night as if searching, but for what?

During the bright early time of day, the birds sang more beautifully than ever before, the hawks spiraled higher and higher into thinner air, the squirrels chattered more loudly, as if trying to compete with the crows who, whether in First World or Home, have always had more to say about nothing than anyone but humans.

Princess had only been the first of Arthur's friends to welcome him. There were so many others: Tristan, Bart, Falcon and Sammy. And there were new friends, too. Amber, the golden retriever, twin fawns who arrived after a terrible fire, and Hodgepodge, a lively little black and white bunny to whom Arthur took a particular liking.

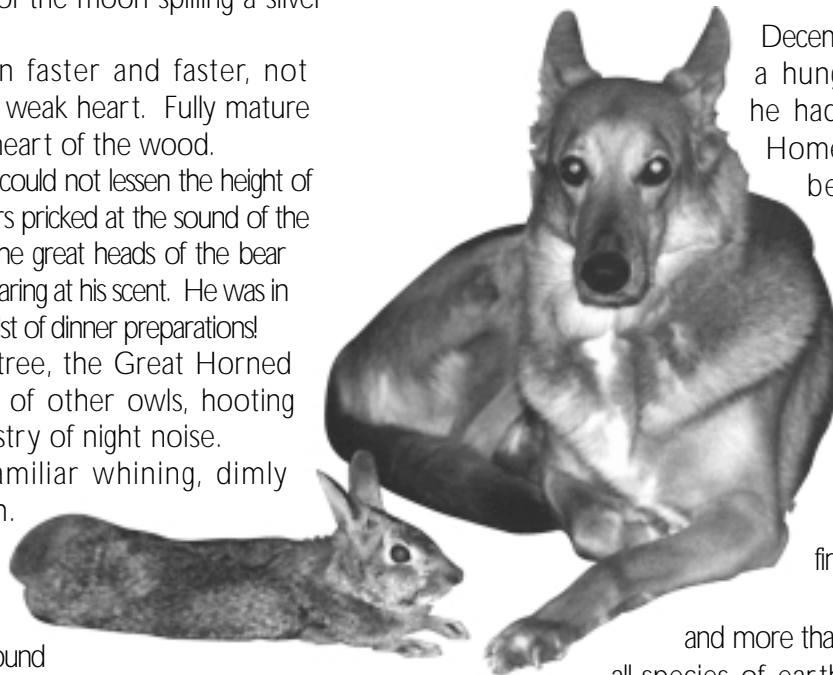
Like Arthur, all of them had been brought into the wood by an emissary of the ancient buck — whom everyone talked about but who was never seen. (Arthur was starting to wonder if he really existed at all). He was able to welcome Big Bunny himself when she arrived Home just a few months after he did. Almost his whole family was here. Someday they would be.

Late in the evening of December 25th, Arthur felt a hunger, the first hunger he had had since waking up Home. It started in his belly, but settled in his heart and, restless, he paced and hopped and stretched and yawned, not knowing how to quiet it. Finally, he found himself back in the wood where the owl had brought him his first night.

Everyone was there and more than ever imagined! In fact, all species of earth were there, except the humans. A multitude, a teeming, a life incapable of being confined in such a small

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place that it absorbed them all into itself.

It was then that Arthur saw him. The ancient buck, just as the others had described him — antlers as wide as his body was long: tall and powerful, regal he stood in their midst.

"Welcome, friends," the buck snorted, ice crystals falling like stars when he shook his massive head.

"Welcome to the Gathering. We are honored to have the 'named-ones' with us this night, whom we believe to be sent as a sign of the humans' eventual good will toward our respective species, recognizing that their presence is possible only because of an act of kindness on the part of a human." He started the litany.

"Welcome to the birth and rebirth of the Master of the Wood. This is our celebration of the mysteries of kindness and compassion and dreams and hopes and miracles. This is our waking vigil of prayer for those who have yet to enter our midst, that all who still linger in First World may find their way Home.

"Delilah," the ancient white-tail lowered his antlers at a small but beautiful grey squirrel, soft and warm in her winter coat, "please begin our celebration."

"I am the named-one 'Delilah,'" she chattered excitedly. (Children must always be first). "I was found paralyzed and starving under a tree, found by a beautiful blond human who didn't care that I was ugly, but saw only my need. I had fallen so far onto hard earth after our mother left one day for food, never to return, and my belly was so empty, I couldn't sleep, but weak from hunger, trying to climb, I fell and hurt my head and my back." Delilah stopped for breath and sped on with her story.

"The flies found me and laid eggs all over me and I would have been eaten up alive! ("ughs" from anyone who ever had flies lay eggs on them) if my human hadn't rescued me! And she named me! 'Delilah!' and brought me to a place that is a little like Home. All is not perfect there, but the humans are kind, and there is no fear, only love — and lots of nuts and apples. Grapes, too!"

Delilah brought dainty front paws to clean her whiskers, remembering the juicy fruit, and her companion on the stump where she sat, a mature Red Tailed Hawk (irritated by the youngster's animated storytelling — including several swishes of a tickly tail to his face) brushed her ear with a talon as if accidentally, while reaching up to scratch his own.

Delilah looked properly chastised and, curling her tail demurely around her feet, sat up attentively as the ancient white-tail spoke again.

Were the ancient buck able to grin, he would have as he said, "So lucky to be named, yes, but not just by a human,

but a beautiful bond one at that!"

"Who would give witness next?" he commanded, and a



sprite, a flat-tailed fairy-diddle, glided down to nestle between the shoulder blades of the speaker. Only a flying squirrel would have the audacity to do such a thing!

"I am unnamed and wish to be named!" he pipped imperiously.

The ancient white-tail strained to look over his shoulder at the mischief-maker. "Get out where I can see you, imp!" he bellowed. The fairy-diddle, unabashed, skittered down an antler to perch on the end of the buck's nose, making the little squirrel appear to have an identical twin.

Finally the buck was able to focus on the wee troublemaker.

"The unnamed cannot be named until the Master of the Wood brings every one Home. You know that. Only those who are found and witness to humans on First World are named. Your turn will come, but now let us continue!"

"But when?" pipped the fairy-diddle, hopping up and down. "I want a name!"

"No one knows when the Master will finally bring all living creatures Home. It could be next Gathering. It could be the next hundredth Gathering. It could be centuries before the humans join us and the naming ceremony is complete." The idea of humans being in their midst silenced the little squirrel momentarily.

"You have a name," the ancient white-tail continued.

"The Master knows it, it just hasn't been revealed to you yet."

Happier (if that is possible for a flying squirrel), the fairy-diddle glided off the buck's nose — helped along by a very strong huff of air from his nostrils — and proceeded to push his way into the cover of a barred owl's wing, much to its chagrin.

"Now, may we finally continue!"

A litany of namings followed: heron, geese, eagles, gulls, robins, crows, ducks, sparrows, deer, opossum, cottontail, skunk, porcupine, mouse, squirrel, bear, coyote, bobcat, finch, bluebird, blue jay, cardinal, badger — all telling of the dangers they had met on First World: power lines strung like snares across the sky; human machines they could not outfly; explosions that ripped muscle from bone — crippling legs and wings; blinding, deafening, maiming them all, but somehow finding themselves in a place near Home, where humans partially entered their world in order to care for them, to give them rest, and peace.

Above the Gathering, dark winds blew clouds away

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to reveal a velvet sky where life dances in patterns all its own.

Arthur's ears were full, for the first time since he had come home, his heart remembered those still living. He felt their love. And he heard his name. Princess, sitting beside him, nuzzled him gently.

"Ancient white-tail is waiting for you, Arthur."

"Yes, sir?" Arthur whispered.

"Tell us your story, little one, for you were very much loved by the humans. Tell us about the mysteries you shared with them. Give us hope."

Arthur told his story, with much interruption from Big Bunny who, recently arrived, believed she could help. She was so very polite that the ancient buck could not find himself perturbed at her.

The wild unnamed of every species listened in wide-eyed silence to Arthur's story. They could not imagine any kindness coming from a human. But his story made them believe . . .

Finishing, Arthur found himself with a longing for those who had yet to come Home: Gwennie, Dutch, Red, his humans. Seeing his eyes glisten, Big Bunny rubbed noses with him: "All of us will be together again one day; you'll see."

The ancient white-tail turned and gathered the attention of all to him. There grew a hush; it became strong and potent and tangible. And there stood shadows in their midst!

Shadows of those who had yet to leave First World. Arthur saw Gwennie clearly. But Gwennie had not yet died!

The ancient white-tail sees through his Master's eyes, and knows with his Master's heart, and so he knew Arthur's question and said, "At the time of the Gathering, we are all one. The dead and the living are all Home for a little while as a sign of what will someday be: true Peace and unconditional Love between all creatures."

Gathering the still-living into their midst, those of Home began to feel the Eternal Mystery that bound them all together. And there was silence, complete and perfect.

Into that silence came a lamb, its eyes as deep as forever; and when Arthur and the rest gazed into those splendid depths, he and Princess and Dellah and all the rest of the named and unnamed and still living became life itself and, in the form of a star, ascended to the magnificent canopy above, to shine over Bethlehem past, present and future, all being the same; until, in grand and total hush, the star fell to earth and was born again to make mysteries real.

May you never cease to hope and to dream, and find in this First World a semblance of Home. ❄️

