

The Tale of
Zen Master Bho Li



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Barbara Verkuilen

Illustrated by Aaron Gilmore



Firethroat Press
Madison, Wisconsin

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Published by Firethroat Press, LLC
Web: www.firethroatpress.com
Email: info@firethroatpress.com

ISBN: 978-0-9830972-0-4

Library of Congress Cataloging Number: 2011928364

Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Verkuilen, Barbara.

The tale of Zen Master Bho Li / Barbara Verkuilen ; illustrated by Aaron Gilmore.

p. : ill. ; cm.

ISBN: 978-0-9830972-0-4

1. Zen Buddhism. 2. Buddhist philosophy. 3. Zen stories. 4. Fables. I. Gilmore, Aaron. II. Title.

BQ9291 .V47 2011
294.392/7

2011928364

Printed in the United States of America.

To the memory of my loving parents,

Max and Helen Jacob

—B.V.

For Rael, my family and friends.

Thanks for all the support.

—A.G.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks:

To Aaron Gilmore, for inspired illustrations that made Bho Li's story come alive in all the ways I'd hoped for, as well as beyond what I could imagine;

To Joan Donovan, for gentle editing and encouragement;

To Kira Henschel at HenschelHaus Publishing, for guidance in traveling the labyrinth of the publishing and printing industries;

To my dear friends, Hildy Nelson, Janice Ward, and Jane McPartland, for your continued interest and support;

To my son Peter, for technical assistance and keen aesthetic sense. Your input helped more than you can know.

And last but not least, to my husband Dale, *The Tale of Zen Master Bho Li* exists only because of you.



How it all began

“**T**he time has come to tell the whole tale,” he said to me one day. The whole tale is what I know of the life and teachings of Zen Master Bho Li.

Master Bho Li has been a companion of sorts, I guess, since the beginning. He frequently makes his presence known through dreams, vignettes seasoned with his unique brand of satirical humor, usually in reference to one or more of my obvious foibles. I don't always know how to respond to these cryptic communiqués, though I tend to err on the side of caution. I see no harm in giving them some credence. One thing I know for certain, with a teacher like Bho Li, one must remain steadfast, no matter where he might lead.

Master Bho Li's second form of communication is subtler, more akin to identifying an intriguing scent. Is it the sea at dawn...old rosewood incense? Some combination perhaps? On the occasions when he calls to me that way, I must do my work to track him down. He rewards these efforts with a smile, like praise, followed by lengthy conversations on topics of mutual interest. Usually, however, these discussions leave me with more questions than answers. I confessed that to him once. His response? An infectious laugh, the kind that seems to say, *“Now we're getting somewhere.”*

Then again, he has been known to retreat into silence, sometimes for years at a time.

Over the course of our long and unusual association, his incredible history has unfolded. I have undertaken the task of committing it to writing at his persistent urging. I have shared this account with a few friends who all asked me, “How did you come by this story?” If you ask me that question, I'll give you the same answer. Master Bho Li told it to me.





ur story begins long ago, in what I imagine as a quaint and picturesque village in China, one nestled languidly between a restless sea and the misted peaks of Li Mountain. I say “imagine” because Bho Li has always been somewhat reluctant to talk about his earliest years. I will share with you the little I’ve be able to glean.

He was the eighth and last child born into a poor family. As a fisherman, his father was gone long hours every day, and sometimes was even away for days at a time, just to be able to provide the barest essentials for his large family. Master Bho Li’s mother spent most of her day tending to his elderly grandparents who lived on the other side of the village.

It was the duty of his seven older siblings, all of them brothers, to take care of Bho Li. “*There was always someone close by to tease me,*” was all he would say when questioned further, except to disclose one seemingly hurtful indignity. Unfortunately, his brothers delighted in calling him “Old Turtle.” This was not a display of affection or term of endearment. You must understand that, in ancient China, the greatest insult one could inflict upon another was to say, “Your grandfather was a turtle egg.”

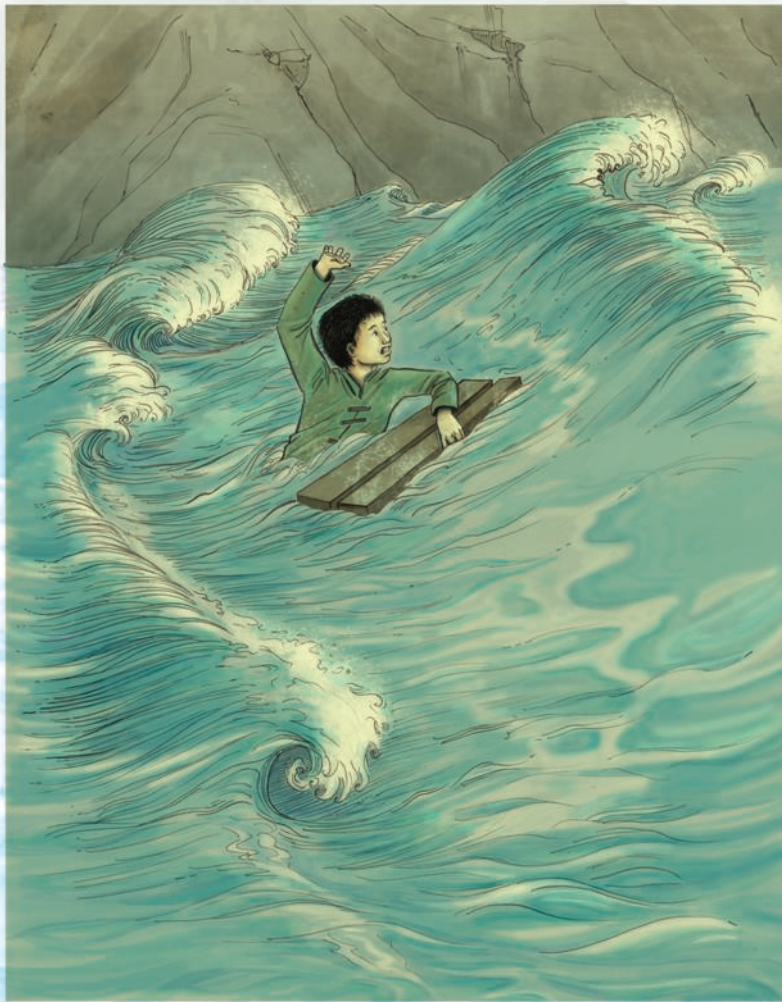
Considering such an upbringing, you might expect him to grow up sad and lonely, or even more than a bit angry. But I’ve never had the slightest indication of that being the case. What he lacked in stature, I guess, he made up for with heart. From the scanty bits he has shared with me, it appears that he remained good-natured and kind, and for that, his brothers mistakenly believed he was not very bright.

* * * * *



He was only eight years old when his whole world was devastatingly altered. His good nature was the reason he survived a great tragedy that befell his entire family. One of his brothers, in an attempt to amuse himself, instructed Bho Li to go door-to-door requesting silly items from their village neighbors. The way Bho Li described the task reminded me of a scavenger hunt. “Old Turtle, go house to house until you find a red rooster feather, then do the same for a tortoiseshell comb belonging to a woman older than seventy,” and so forth.

“Old Turtle” listened politely to his brother’s instructions. He knew it was pure nonsense, but his brother seemed to be enjoying himself so much that Bho Li didn’t have the heart to do anything but pretend to go along. He wasn’t really going to do any of it. Instead, barefoot and carefree, he went down to the sea and played for most of the morning. That is why he was not at home when the earthquake struck. The trembling and upheaval were of great magnitude, killing everyone in the village, except for those few who, for whatever reason, were at the seashore that morning.



Accompanying the quake was a huge tsunami that snatched up Bho Li and carried him half way up Li Mountain. As he was helplessly carried along by that enormous wave, he could see that no one in his family was going to survive the catastrophe.

The next moment, he found himself clinging to the sharp, rocky outcrop of the mountain, terrified. Needless to say, he was completely unprepared for the circumstances in which he now found himself.

With a great deal of shame, he confided to me that at the time, he thought of just letting go and falling to his death. On some level, the idea even comforted him. But for reasons he could never quite explain, he noticed that even though he was contemplating letting go, his fingers clung to the craggy mountainside for dear life.

It was a defining moment for him, even as young as he was, to witness the disparity between what he was thinking and what he was unconsciously doing. And even though it would be years into the future before he experienced the full impact of that realization, at that moment, he listened to his fingers.

Later he would tell his disciples, *“The truth of one’s life reveals itself in the smallest of details. What you do can be more important than what you think, and don’t be fooled by what you think you are doing.”*

How long he clung there on the mountain is uncertain. When asked, he said, *“It was as if time stopped. It could have been a moment, or forever.”* My confusion at his response raised a glint of mischief in his eyes. He quickly added that, although he does not remember exactly how, he was eventually able to grope his way to a small, sheltering cleft in the mountainside. It was a narrow, tight space with a sparse outcrop of rock that could serve as a ledge on which he could rest. When he looked up, he could not see where the gap in the mountain might end. Shivering, and exhausted from his fright and terrible losses, he fell into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, Bho Li awakened to his dire predicament. He thought to himself, *Maybe there are others nearby who escaped, like me.* He spent a long time hollering for help. No one answered his cries. Only the soft curling fingers of morning light, shadowed by the cool mist of clouds yet to rise above the mountain peaks, came in response. All Bho Li was aware of was the *thump, thump, thump* of his own heartbeat.

“Can you imagine it, Renshin? [He always calls me by my Buddhist name.] Eight years old, lost and alone beyond what is imaginable.”

Bho Li spent several days crouched on that bit of ledge without food or water, knowing he would not last much longer. He could not imagine how he might escape such an unkind fate. Time took on an unreality. Later he told his disciples, *“It is only when we do not understand inconceivability that things appear hopeless. When we are intimate with the inconceivable, nothing need be impossible.”* [*“But of course, I did not know that then,”* he added for my benefit.]

Bho Li had only a vague sense of the next sequence of events. He suspected that it was early morning on the third day that he first noticed the presence of a small, noisy bird. It was

a beautiful, but rare, Firethroat. He described this bird as being about the size of a robin, with dark-bluish top feathers and an orange bib cresting to a blazing iridescence at the throat.

The Firethroat is known for its lyrical song, but it would be some time before he would hear that, Bho Li told me. At that moment, though, the little bird appeared upset, and the sounds emanating from it were calls of distress, as if it was scolding him. Master Bho Li related being overjoyed with the company of the little bird, despite its apparently ornery disposition.

The bird fluttered toward the opening where Bho Li sat stranded, and then flew off. It did this repeatedly until he stuck his head out, trying to see around the limits of the mountainside. He wondered, *What is this bird doing?* He could no longer see it, but the squawking told him it was somewhere above him, but remained close by. He prayed it would not fly away, and it didn't. Instead, it began to sing a softer call, a comforting cooing, as if to encourage him.

"I didn't know what to do. The bird repeatedly flew down and fluttered at my face, then flew off to where I could no longer see it. I groped around the edge of that tiny ledge. But I was too small. It all seemed so very hopeless.

"Then I got the idea to shinny up the gap to see where it might lead. It took a long time to get the nerve to do that. Later, others told me that it was a brave thing to do. But really, I was just desperate. Sometimes, I think that's all courage is, you know, the first step we take past desperation."

Eventually, he scaled up the gap as he envisioned, and reached a spot where it abruptly ended and became too wide to straddle. For a moment he thought he'd only made things worse. He did not know what to do next.

"That Firethroat saved me, Renshin!" He explained that the little bird flew down and landed just where Bho Li needed to put his hands and feet in order to get the best grip to safely edge his way up the mountainside onto a path, that prior to risking the climb, he could



not have known was there. It took some time for him to understand that the little bird was actually showing him the way to free himself. *“Once I set my mind to do it, I had total trust in that bird. In fact, I trusted it as I had never done another living being before, although inching along that precipice was still a dangerous feat, and I did it with great caution.”*

Scrambling at last onto the path, he stopped to catch his breath and look around. The bright expanse of morning sky, azure blue, and dotted with wispy sprays of white clouds tinged with lavender, stunned him. The short distance from the ledge below to the path changed everything, and he couldn't help but wonder, *How does the whole world shift so completely from one moment to the next?* And the path had been so close all that time.

Once again, the little Firethroat commanded Bho Li's attention. Now it was flying in and out of the woods alongside the path, beckoning him to follow. Once in the woods, the path became hidden, but he felt an ease flowing through him, just knowing it was there. He could explore it later. For the first time since his ordeal began, he thought, *Maybe I'll be all right.*

The Firethroat flew to a small bush laden with glossy red berries, and began to eat them. Bho Li immediately understood that his feathered friend was showing him they were edible, and safe for him to eat, too. And he did eat, and eat, and eat. Throughout his lifetime, he retained a fondness for goji berries, despite their slight bitterness.

The little bird stayed close, as if it knew Bho Li needed companionship. Wherever it flew, Bho Li followed. They spent the day in communion and celebration. As night came upon them, Bho Li grew anxious. The narrow chasm in the mountainside, although precarious, had offered a degree of safety. *“In the beginning, the nights were a time of terror for me, Renshin. I was deathly afraid of goblins and dragons, and all manner of things that the mind can imagine in the dark ...”*

The Firethroat was Bho Li's mentor for nearly two years. From it, he learned how to quickly build a nest in a tree for a safe place to rest and sleep. His diet expanded to include a



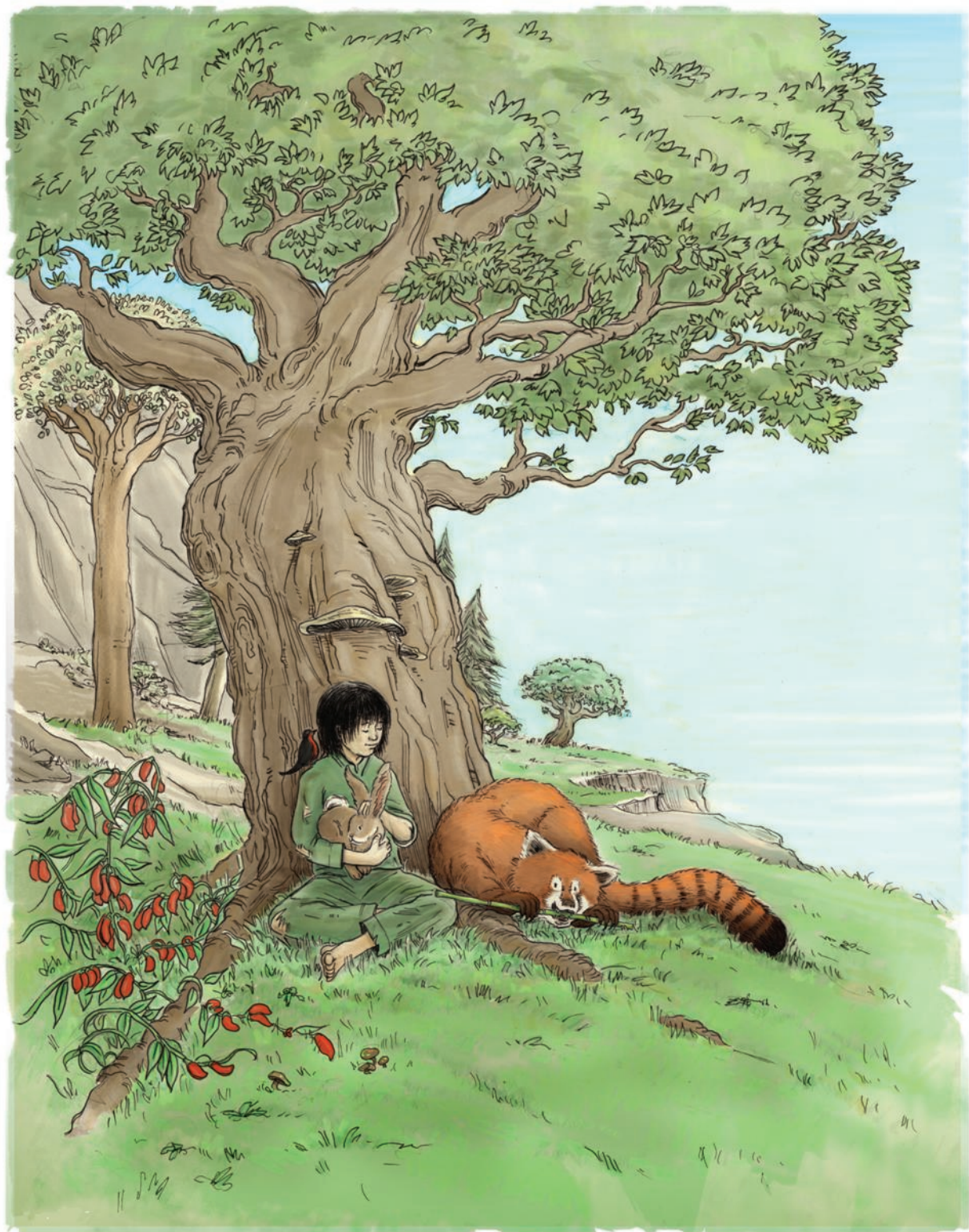
large array of wild foods eaten by the animals of the woodlands. His senses sharpened. He could sniff out even the tiniest of water holes. Bho Li's life was busy with the details of surviving, and it was only in his dreams that memories of his family and human companionship briefly intruded. Exploration of the path yielded no villages.

“I was truly a wild child, running through the woods all day, keeping warm at night under leaves and moss packed in my nest. During the cold season, I practically hibernated, sleeping most of the day and night. The animals showed great kindness towards me, leaving bits of food from time to time. On the coldest of nights, many smaller friends crowded into my nest, and we all snuggled together for warmth.”

Of course, my favorite companion was the little Firethroat. I so depended on it. After a while, it would fly off and leave me alone for longer and longer periods of time. I always missed it when it was gone. How I wished I could fly! Funny, when I think of it now, I missed that precious bird more than I did my own parents.” He looked off in the distance to a place I could not see, and added, *“I don't quite know what to make of that ...”*

Things changed irrevocably the year Bho Li turned ten. That spring, he did not anticipate with excitement, as he had before, the appearance of certain tender bamboo shoots the Red Panda had taught him were good to eat. Even though the weather was warming, he was spending as much time in his nest during the day as at night.

His forest friends began to worry when he did not answer their calls. Yes, he had learned to speak the languages of them all, the Firethroat, the Slaty Bunting, and the Silver Oriole, too. There was the mountain cat, by whose call Bho Li could determine its distance away, rabbit-y news, and the base tone messages of frogs and toads, not to mention the informative buzzing of a large array of insects. Among his favorites were the calls and chatter of the golden monkeys, with their blue alien faces. He knew and understood the chirps, clacks, squawks, cheeps, peeps, barks, and growls of all those with whom he shared the forest community.



One morning, as he lethargically lounged in his nest, long after the sun had burned the morning dew off the last of the early ground flowers, the Firethroat returned from a brief time away. It rested and cooed at the edge of his nest. He barely looked up. After several attempts to engage him, it began to scold him, as it hadn't done since their first encounter. Even this failed to rouse his attention, and that made the little bird hopping mad. There was no doubt what it thought of his current state of affairs. Nothing it did seemed to make any difference. The Firethroat darted off and did not return for three long days and nights, the longest they had ever been parted. Bho Li confided to me that he became afraid that he had pushed things too far, and that this time his dear friend wouldn't return at all. He was filled with remorse for his sullen behavior.

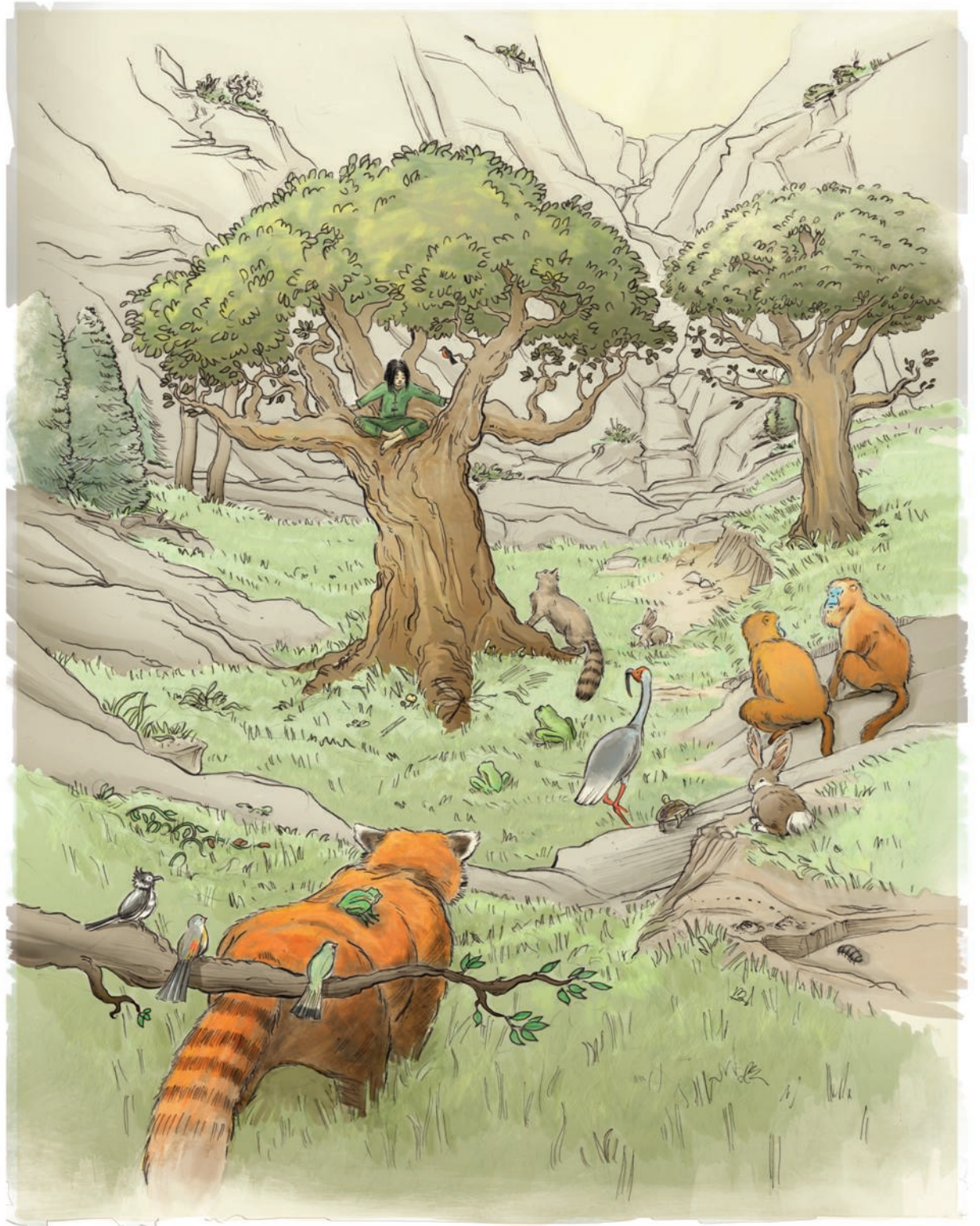
When the Firethroat finally did come back, it called a meeting of all the woodland creatures and told them what it thought was the problem, thereby enlisting their cooperation in a plan to help him.

Each creature in his or her own way began dismantling his nest. At first, he was amused, not fully understanding their intent. Then he was annoyed by their activity. When their task was complete, Bho Li found himself sitting in a bare crook of the tree that now was the only home he could remember.

When he looked down he saw all the animals congregated beneath him. Each called to him in its own unique language. There was no doubt they wanted him to follow them. *“What choice did I have? Anyway, they all seemed so excited about what was happening.”*

They traveled together as a group for several days and nights, passing through neighborhoods not their own, many of which they had never seen. Some were sunny and cheerful, filled with dappled light and a profusion of multicolored flowers. Others were dark and forbidding, leaving everyone relieved once the troop had passed through.

The direction they traveled took them higher up the mountain, with the little Firethroat leading the way. On the last evening they would spend together, they settled down early.



Everyone was quiet, unusually so. No one slept well, or much, that night. A tension of expectancy filled the air.

In the morning, Bho Li arose ready for another day's walk to ... well, he didn't know where. The others peered at him from their nests and lodges. They all looked at him intently, until he read the goodbye in their eyes.

Once they recognized that he understood they had come as far as they would travel, they approached him in turns to offer last bits of advice and best wishes. "Never pass a sparkling stream without taking a sip." "Put some seeds away for later, but remember where you put them." "Don't take all of anything, no matter how much you love it." "Don't be so busy you forget to see the beauty that surrounds you." He was confused and upset as his furred and feathered friends turned to make their way back to the woodlands without him. He was just starting to follow them, when the Firethroat called him to follow it instead.

It was just the two of them now as they journeyed for hours beyond the place the woodland friends had all spent the night. Suddenly the landscape changed. A small clearing had been hacked out of the wilderness. Tension turned cartwheels in Bho Li's stomach when he sighted a small hut a short distance away.

He crouched there frozen, hidden by the trees of the wilderness surrounding the little dwelling. It was a humble structure, but sturdy and well tended, with a newly thatched roof and a substantial garden, planted not just with vegetables but beautiful flowers, too. The Firethroat flew toward it. Bho Li remained motionless. Now the Firethroat sang its lovely song with persistence, until an old woman came out of the house to listen. That was the first time Bho Li laid eyes on Soyu Sei.

Here, with your kind indulgence, I must digress for a moment. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, there are not many tales of great women in the annals of Zen literature that have come down to us thus far, although I am sure there have been many. Of course, we could start with Mahapajapati, the Buddha's aunt and stepmother, and Yasodhara, his wife,



to name just two who were there from the beginning. But if you read voraciously enough, from time to time, woven into the ancient stories, you will encounter a unique figure, an old woman who runs a teahouse or an inn. In such tales, she has contact with various Zen fools and masters, and generally has a most influential impact on them. She is affectionately known in Zen lore as a “Dangerous Granny.”

What makes a Dangerous Granny dangerous, you ask? Oh, she’s not aggressive in the ways we fear from the world. Then, what’s endangered by the presence of a Dangerous Granny? Strangely, it’s our ignorance, our delusions, our self-importance, and consequently, our unhappiness. Now you may be thinking, “Why should we fear that?” And that’s a very good question.

A Dangerous Granny is as old as the mountains. She usually lives alone and has been there since the oldest grandfather was a boy, and remembers his grandfather’s stories of her from when he was a child. She supports herself by tending a small garden and providing tea or lodging for travelers passing through, most of whom, by the time they meet her, have lost their way.

Those living closest to a Dangerous Granny have little contact with her. She unnerves them in some way. The children think she may even be a witch. But in times of Great Need people ratchet up their courage and pay her a visit, trading small portions of rice for wisdom. She never turns away anyone in need.

All this was more than true for Soyu Sei.

[Oh, and one more thing before we return to our story. Master Bho Li would like to go on record at this time to say he is quite frustrated that it has taken this long to get to what he thinks is the most important part of his tale. I have argued that his early history and experiences are equally essential. We remain in disagreement on this point.]

As the Firethroat continued its beautiful song for Soyu Sei’s enjoyment, it began to fly in various directions, frequently crossing the area where Bho Li was hiding. Soyu Sei was

alert to the strange behavior of the lovely little bird, and before long, the old woman caught a glimpse of the boy, frozen and semi-hidden in the underbrush.

She set out at once to befriend him, and did it the way one does for any feral creature, with great patience and food. In his case, that meant steamed rice and cooked vegetables in tasty sauces. Bho Li just couldn't resist those offerings. Over a period of time, trust developed between them, and he felt comfortable spending more and more time in her company, until one day he ventured inside.

Not long after he began living with her, Soyu Sei asked him how he got the odd name of "Old Turtle." He told her that when he was a baby, he had an exceptionally large, bald head. His scrawny neck could not support his efforts to look curiously around. When he tried to hold his head up, it would immediately drop beneath his bunting, like a turtle pulling its head into its shell. His brothers, unconcerned for his humiliation, would to their great amusement, repeat this story at every opportunity.

Soyu Sei studied her ragamuffin charge for a long time and then said, "I'm sure that is what your brothers told you. But I think the real reason they called you that is because you have ancient eyes."

Bho Li responded to this remark as if he had received a swift blow, awakening him from an unending bad dream. His eyes filled with tears, and all attempts to hold them at bay were useless.

Soyu Sei cradled him on her lap, and rocked him while he cried, while he wept, while he sobbed, while he wailed. He remembered thinking to himself, *Now that these tears have started, I'll never stop crying.*



But, shortly thereafter, he relaxed into the soft, competent arms of Soyu Sei, and was comforted by her unequivocal acceptance.

Of course, he eventually stopped crying, at about the same time the hiccups started. The sage old woman and the scrawny child looked at each other and burst out laughing. Before releasing him, she kissed him gently on the top of his head.

“It’s never too soon to learn that when we bar the door to grief, we lock out joy as well. You’ll be fine now,” she said, “in fact, you’ll be more than fine.” And he believed what she told him.

After a poignant silence, Soyu Sei began preparing their evening meal. Bho Li straightened the sitting cushions around the low dining table, and set out plates and eating utensils. He sat at his place, listening to a choir of cicadas that had arrived with dusk, and patiently waited for the meal to be served.

Soyu Sei never again called him “Old Turtle,” but gave him the name Bho Li, which means “Wisdom Eye from Li Mountain.”

* * * * *

Bho Li spent just over three years living with Soyu Sei. Their relationship was warm and companionable, in the varied and best ways possible between two individuals. They were mother/son, teacher/student, mentor/apprentice, but on

on the deepest level, they were true friends. Each showed immense care for the well-being of the other, appropriate to the level of their abilities, of course. These abilities were always changing as Bho Li prospered under Soyu Sei's wise and tender guidance.

Soyu Sei had a clever way of testing him. She would frequently ask, "What is your question?" It was a game of sorts, yet both knew it was being played for real.

"What is your question?" meant, "What path are you on, and where is it leading you?" Over the years they played the "game," the nature of his responses changed.

In the beginning, Bho Li asked childlike things, as was only fitting for a ten-year old boy. "*Why is the sky blue?*" or "*Where does summer go when winter comes?*"

Soyu Sei rarely answered his questions. The game provided experience in voicing them, and inquiry was the quality she hoped to instill. She hadn't asked in some time, and Bho Li began to believe that they had outgrown that game. But one day, when he had all but forgotten about it, she asked him again as they finished their dinner, "What is your question?"

In the past, he would always prepare for the next time she might ask him that. He'd eagerly await the opportunity to reply to her prompt. This time, he was caught off guard, yet he responded without hesitation. Looking her straight in the eye, he asked, "*What does it really mean to be a human being?*" His question surprised him. *Where did that come from?* His face flushed, and it was as if every cell in his body was charged with the portent of great change, and there was no way back.

Soyu Sei did not appear surprised. She held his gaze and whispered, "I knew this day would come." Her response only increased his apprehension. She told him that he had grown

a great deal in the time they lived together, and that he was now ready for the next chapter in the exciting life of Bho Li, formerly known as Old Turtle.

Over the next days and weeks, she prepared him, and reassured him that it didn't mean an end to their relationship, as coming to her had ended his friendship with the Firethroat. The little bird made brief visits from time to time, as if checking on Bho Li's progress. But after a while the enchanting creature stopped coming altogether. Bho Li and Soyu Sei talked about it only once, when he tearfully answered her asking, "What is your question?" with "*How long do you think birds live?*"

No, Soyu Sei assured him, they were to be lifelong friends. He could come to visit her, and she would go to see him. If he thought he could sneak away from her, she would track him down like a hungry cat spying a juicy mouse. Wherever in the world he might try and hide, she would find him. He loved her more than ever when she talked like that. But above all else, he trusted her, although the prospect of change left him very uneasy.

So it was that Soyu Sei and Bho Li set out one fine and glorious day for the Zen monastery called "Silent Thunder," one half day's climb higher up Li Mountain. [Master Bho Li told me many times how to say Silent Thunder in Chinese, but my pronunciation is terrible. When he hears me try to say it, he laughs with a high squeal of delight, a sound he only makes when he's heard something terribly silly. Quite frankly, there are times when I tire of his good-natured ridicule.]

Soyu Sei was a dear friend of the abbot's. Once there, Bho Li recognized him as a visitor who would occasionally call on Soyu Sei, but he had never realized who the man was. Bho Li was startled to think that in all the time he lived with her, he never asked who the people were who came to visit, or where they were from.

This man, who had the bushiest eyebrows Bho Li had ever seen, like two furry, brown caterpillars, one sleeping above each eye, was really Zen Master Wu, abbot of the monas-

tery. Master Wu served Soyu Sei and Bho Li tea. When it was time for Soyu Sei to leave, he courteously gave them time alone to say good-bye.

Standing there was awkward. Bho Li wanted time to stop. *I'm not ready for this*, he thought. Soyu Sei, as if reading his mind, said, "The great adventures in life always take us by surprise. No time to prepare. No way to hang onto what we think we know." She rose up on her toes to kiss him on the forehead. He had to bow down slightly for her to reach him. That's how much he'd grown. "Listen carefully to the Voice of Emptiness. It whispers tirelessly for the benefit of all beings," she said.

"I don't understand," he replied.

"You will," she told him, "you will." And then she was gone.

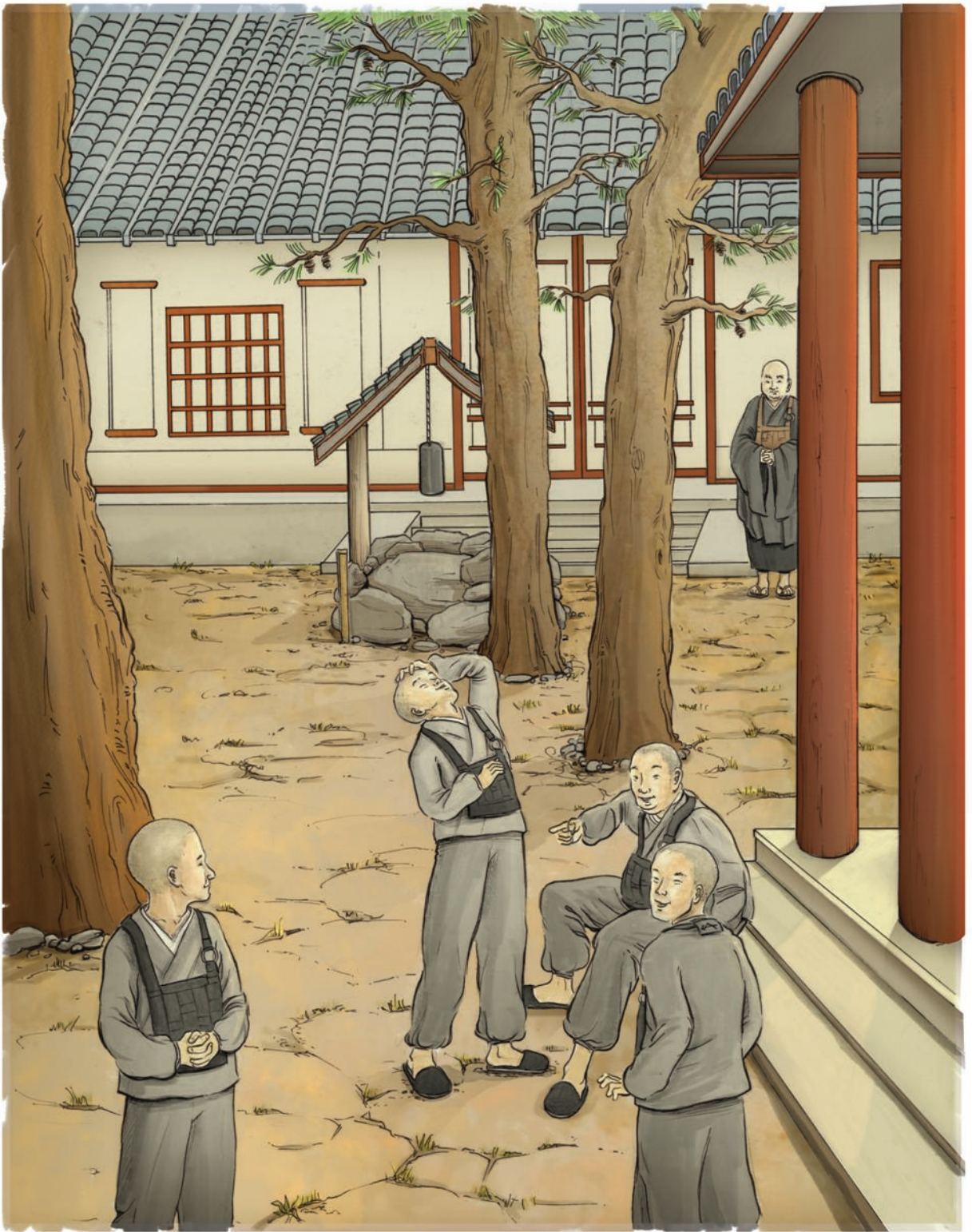


After living with Soyu Sei, life in the monastery came as a big shock. With her, life had been peaceful. Their days were filled with activities from sunrise to sunset, but he never felt rushed, judged, or insecure. They just took care of things naturally, knowing that there was plenty of time to get all the chores done, as well as having time to lie in the grass by the stream behind Soyu Sei's hut, where Bho Li made twig rafts that carried his dreams to the ten directions.

By comparison, life at the monastery was hectic, with what appeared to be arbitrary and impossible schedules, precise procedures for every activity, and gongs and bells that held no meaning for him. And all those Dharma brothers! Being surrounded by so many young men brought back a lot of unpleasant memories. Bho Li was the youngest monk there, as he had been the youngest in his family. Teasing, competition, ambition for a higher place in the pecking order, and vying for Master Wu's attention and approval seemed to be the name of the game.

Bho Li held himself apart from these activities. By doing so he became the focus of the other monks' attention, and then the object of their teasing and ridicule. To his surprise, he found that their attempts to rattle him did not affect him in ways he had reason to suspect it might. He remained self-assured in the face of their ill-natured testing. Their treatment, intended to make him feel bad about himself, only showed him the nature of their characters.

When they couldn't get a rise out of him, they doubled their efforts. When that didn't work, they shunned him. Through it all, Bho Li maintained a cheerful disposition and always treated others with courtesy. Eventually, he earned their respect without trying or competing or resorting to their tactics. His deportment during this difficult time revealed his natural leadership, and none of this escaped the watchful eye of Master Wu.



He found his true refuge in meditation. Once he told me, *“I loved it from the beginning. Not long after my arrival at the monastery, it occurred to me that Zazen is how a human being learns to soar.”*

Time passed swiftly. Days became weeks, weeks became months, and months, years. Bho Li did get to visit Soyu Sei, although not as often as he might have liked. It was six months before there was an opportunity to see her again.

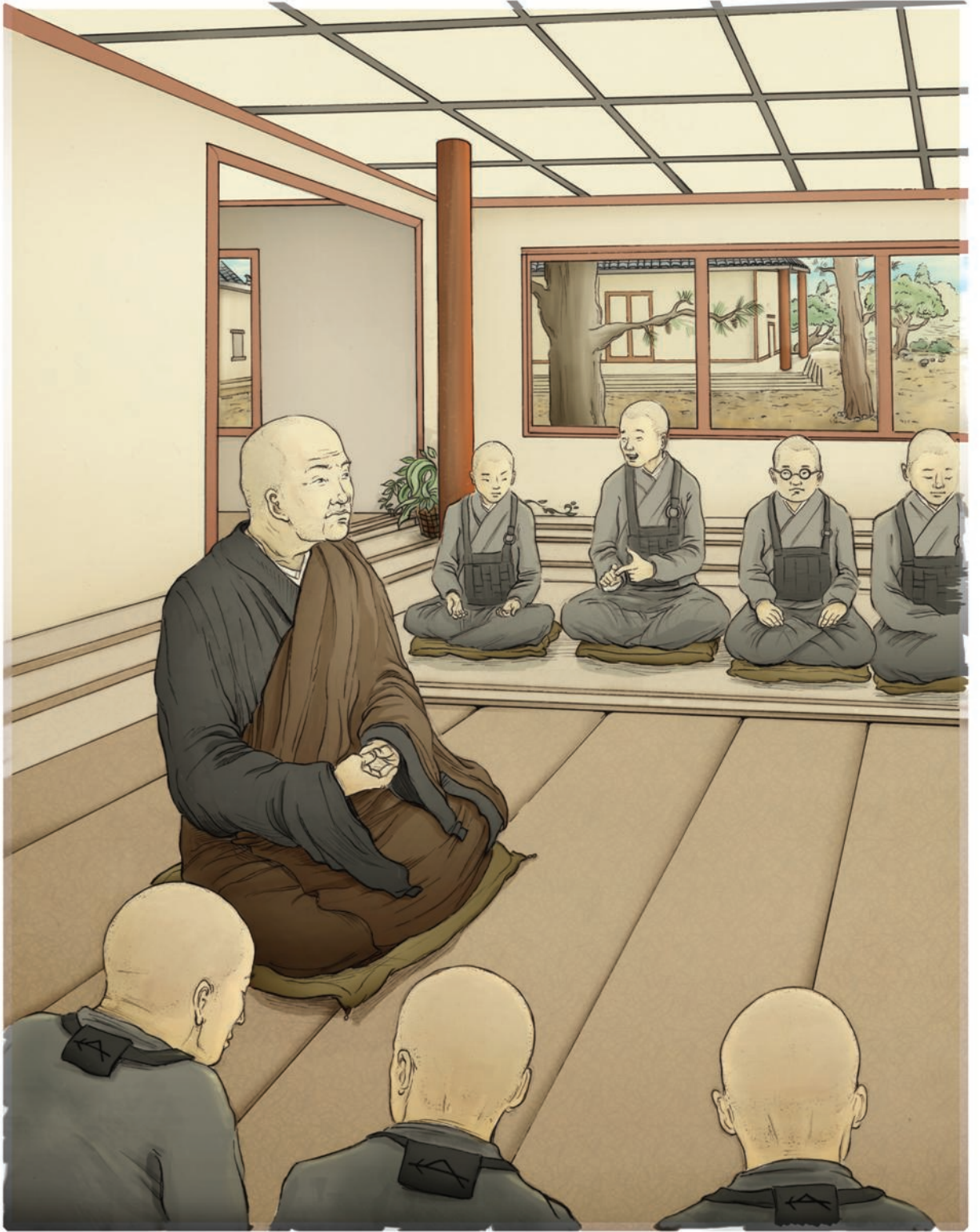
Theirs was a great reunion. She could see that even though he’d only been at the monastery for a short time, he was thriving under the direction of Master Wu. They stayed up late into the night, talking and laughing, and just being silent in each other’s company, which perhaps, was their deepest form of communication.

As he prepared to leave, Bho Li told Soyu Sei, *“I guess you were right about my being ready for the next adventure. But I want you to know I’ll always consider you my first Zen teacher.”*

She smiled shyly behind her hand, as she always did when embarrassed. “No, no, Bho Li,” she said with great tenderness. “We all have the same first teacher.” Seeing his confusion, she quickly added, “Everyone’s first teacher is the Great Loneliness.” He closed his eyes, exhaled audibly, and as if the gesture were meant as a communication only with himself, nodded his head ever so slightly.

There are many adventures—and misadventures—that could be told about Bho Li’s years studying at the monastery, his great awakening experience, and becoming Master Wu’s only Dharma heir and successor at the age of forty-two. Perhaps, if there is interest, they can be told another time. What Master Bho Li wants me to tell you about is the relationship he had with his three chief disciples after he became the abbot of the monastery, when Master Wu passed on.

Although Master Bho Li had many students, Sei Wot, Noh Hui, and Wai Mi stood above the rest. Those three disciples caused him the greatest problems of his thirty-two year



tenure as abbot of Silent Thunder Monastery, but to Bho Li's credit, he was able to learn what he needed from each of them. He had his hands full, though. His encounter with these particular monks challenged him in ways he had not been tested for many years.

Sei Wot was a tall, lanky, and quite handsome lad who was in love with his own ideas and beliefs. He thought he already knew everything he needed. He would spout forth at the slightest provocation, entertaining the other monks with his intellectual prowess. Sei Wot had studied and memorized many of the Sutras, revered teachings of the Buddha. And to keep the record honest, he was a bit of a show-off.

Traditional methods for handling such individuals proved inadequate. No amount of Dharma combat, those heated debates between a master and disciple, that demand an immediate demonstration of the student's realization, brought any measurable change in Sei Wot's lack of true understanding, nor a fist, staff, or shout.

During a visit with Soyu Sei, who after all these years still looked as spry and vibrant as Bho Li's first memory of her, he confided the problems he was having with Sei Wot. She listened attentively, but made no direct response. As he was preparing to leave, just as he walked out the door, she said, "Bho Li, pay attention to your intention."

Pay attention to your intention. He kept returning to this thought as he slowly climbed the familiar, well-worn path back to the monastery. He always enjoyed the trek back up the mountain. It was mid-summer, and a jamboree of periwinkle butterflies accompanied him a good part of the way.

He was almost to the monastery grounds before he had a flash of insight that clarified Soyu Sei's last comment. *How could I have missed that?* he thought.

He saw that he had unwittingly entered into a power struggle with Sei Wot, and everyone in the community was suffering because of it. In his relationship with Sei Wot, he had become too concerned with protecting his role as the abbot, which never was in jeopardy.



Bho Li had all the requisite training in classical Buddhist texts, but that was not where his talents lay. His initial training, after all, had been with the creatures of the forest, and his tutelage there provided him with an enduring connection and love of the natural world. His disciples were continually amazed at how attuned he was with his surroundings. He could hear, and respond to, even the smallest insect in distress.

Once he spent hours in the garden securing tall plants to stakes, and hauling in enough dry wood to keep the kitchen stove going for three days. A monk asked, “What are you doing?” Bho Li said he was preparing for the storm. The confused monk looked up at the bright, cloudless autumn sky and asked, “How do you know there is going to be a storm?” Bho Li replied, “*Its scent is on the wind.*” It was the worst storm they’d experienced in many years.

Bho Li now admitted to himself that he had become a bit intimidated by Sei Wot’s estimable intellect, and his ability to recite long passages of the Buddha’s teaching from memory. Making this insecurity conscious initiated the process that resolved the conflict. Bho Li’s entire attitude toward Sei Wot changed, and that made all the difference. He realigned his approach to the rambunctious young monk. Humor replaced competition, and a deep reservoir of affection toward Sei Wot was the result. Sei Wot’s demeanor modified in kind. He quit smirking when other monks made mistakes, and was no longer braggadocios. He began doing thoughtful things for the benefit of others without calling attention to himself. These, and other, changes earned him what he really desired and deserved; the high regard of his fellow monks.

The community within the monastery had no sooner settled into a new level of harmonious activity than Noh Hui lumbered up to its gate seeking admittance. Noh Hui was much older than the other monks, and it was unusual that a man thirty-two years of age would desire to become a novice monk.

Bho Li's reputation as a Zen Master had spread, and when Noh Hui learned of Bho Li's personal history, he set out determined to meet him. He thought, *Maybe, just maybe, I could learn to trust a man like that.*

Noh Hui was a burly man, his face plump and round as the full moon, craters and all. He was awkward in all manner of expressing himself. Even though his intentions were sincere, Noh Hui had difficulty performing the most basic requirements for life in the monastery. What he could do, he did in a most peculiar way. It seemed to the other monks that he wasn't really trying, and this led to hard feelings towards him.

His overriding characteristic was that he challenged everything. "Why do we have to do it that way?" "What is the purpose of doing this?" "What will I get out of it?" And so forth. Noh Hui was resistance personified.

Bho Li witnessed the effect Noh Hui was having on the other monks. Various attempts to improve the situation were short-lived. He thought to himself, *Why can't twenty people who live in relative harmony with each other bring one difficult person some peace, instead of one difficult person driving the other twenty to their wit's end?*

With that thought, Bho Li realized he had begun to resent Noh Hui, and set off for a chat with Soyu Sei. He told her all about the problem. She listened, served his favorite jasmine-pearl tea, mended his well-patched traveling robe, and discussed the weather. She did everything but respond directly to Bho Li's dilemma. He knew to wait patiently. She would respond in her own good time, in her own curious way. Sometime before the visit ended, she would make an offhand comment, seemingly unrelated to anything they had discussed, that would grab his attention and eventually lead to a solution. That's just how it was with her.

As he was leaving, Soyu Sei walked out with him to go work in the garden. They said their goodbyes. He turned and began walking away. Before he was out of hearing range, Soyu Sei called out, "Bho Li, don't forget what you don't know!" Without turning or breaking his stride, he waved another goodbye and proceeded up the path to the monastery, smiling to himself.

Don't forget what you don't know. Hmmm! He immediately understood that at any given time, in any given circumstance, what he didn't know about a situation was always infinitely greater than what he thought he knew. He made a vow to himself to remember that.

Making that vow was humbling. It would safeguard against the tendency toward arrogant judgment that so easily contaminated relationships. In applying this vow directly to the problem with Noh Hui, Bho Li realized that he knew very little about Noh Hui's life before coming to the monastery. *One cannot abandon the mundane in search of the sacred,* he told himself.

A short time later, Bho Li asked Noh Hui to be his attendant, which allowed for more direct and personal contact between them. Slowly Noh Hui's story unfolded, the details of which would frequently make Bho Li openly and unashamedly weep.

It would seem that Bho Li's tears were just the right balm for healing Noh Hui's festering karmic wounds. With each revealed detail, Noh Hui was changed. This happened ever so slowly, without anyone taking much notice. But as the months past, Bho Li began to observe a change in the way Noh Hui and the other monks interacted, even though he remained as clumsy as ever.



That brings our story around to Wai Mi. Wai Mi was Bho Li's only female disciple, and what a ruckus she caused, as she sat in perfect meditative posture at the entrance to the monastery grounds. This was the proper manner by which an individual requested permission to study at a particular monastery, and it must be maintained until approval was granted or denied. She sat there twice as long as anyone else had, I might add. This was not exactly deliberate. It was just that in China at that time, monks and nuns did not live and study the Dharma together. Wai Mi's request there was highly unusual, and to some of the monks her motives were suspect.

Wai Mi was barely past her teens and ever so pretty, with beautiful, long, black hair that almost reached her waist. The first thought each monk had when he first saw her was, *Would she really shave her head?*

Her presence brought up innumerable problems for the community, and she hadn't even gotten past the gate. Bho Li made up his mind to grant her permission to enter the moment he first saw her, but he felt he had to let things follow their natural course.

The debate within the monastery raged. "It just isn't done!" "How can we allow this?" "Where would she stay?" "We can make her the cook!" "Look at all the problems this is causing already." "Mark my words, this is just the beginning." On and on and on it went.

Among themselves, the monks organized a system to continually observe her, taking turns day and night. She sat there three full days, not eating or drinking a thing, and moving only to attend to the most urgent needs of a normal person. They waited and hoped for some small infraction of the protocols, so they could dismiss her petition out of hand. She disappointed them at every turn. In the end, there were no grounds for refusal, except for the fact that she was a woman. To the monks' credit, the consideration continued. At other monasteries, the bare fact that she was a woman would have been enough.

Eventually, after everyone was exhausted from the many heated exchanges over the issue of allowing a woman to become a monk, they clamored to Bho Li quarters to ask him



what he intended to do about “the problem.” He asked, “*What problem?*” and then walked outside and personally escorted her in. He soon found out “what problem.”

After her ordination ceremony, a place was made for Wai Mi to sleep and change from formal robes to working attire. This afforded her a small degree of privacy as the only female. All the other monks slept in the meditation hall, except for Bho Li, who also had separate quarters. She woke earlier than the others to use the facilities. Other minor accommodations were made. [It really wasn’t all that hard.] She did her best to blend into the routine of monastery life.

Her earnest intentions and refined capabilities did nothing to appease the ire of the other monks. Her presence bred acrimony and seemed to bring out the worst in many of them. They were uncommonly harsh with her, and before too long she had become the monastery scapegoat. Any dissatisfaction, difficulty, or discrepancy quickly became her fault.

Wai Mi only tried harder. She made every attempt to respond in ways she thought would earn their acceptance. Except for the meditation hall, she began to keep out of sight as much as possible, doing her tasks in isolation. She never voiced a question or contributed a comment during Dharma discussions, and it was not that she didn’t have anything to say. Ironically, she tried to behave as if she wasn’t there at all. Eventually the weight and injustice of her treatment began to wear her down. That wasn’t enough, either. Once the other monks sensed her inner doubt and weakening resolve, their harsh treatment of her was unrelenting.

The situation finally became so untenable that Wai Mi sought Bho Li’s permission to leave. “All I wanted to do was study with you,” she said tearfully. “I didn’t expect any special privileges. I was willing to do whatever was required of any other monk. I don’t know what made me think I could do this. I’m so sorry to let you down.”

Bho Li was moved by the sincerity of her offer. But he did not want her to leave in this manner. He knew it would not be good for her or the other monks if the situation ended this

way. He asked her to wait with her final decision to leave, while he developed one more plan to try and turn things around. Out of respect for Bho Li, she agreed, but without much hope for success.

Once again, Bho Li set off to see Soyu Sei. Interestingly, she became quite animated and involved in helping him with the problem of Wai Mi. I made the observation that in all the stories he'd told me, this was the first and only time Soyu Sei had become directly involved. He said, "*Hmmm, I never thought of it that way. Although that's true, I can't say why.*" [But I think I know. This time, the problem involved another woman, and she wasn't going to leave things to chance. However, I did not share this suspicion with him.]

After thoroughly listening to his explanation of the situation, Soyu Sei told Bho Li that, in her opinion, the problem was that none of the monks understood that there is no blame, only responsibility. Wai Mi, by the fact that she was female, had become a convenient repository for all their dissatisfaction.

"That notion has been culturally supported for eons," she said. Then she asked, with an incredulous tone Bho Li rarely heard, "Can they *really* believe she is the cause of all their problems? I would have hoped that years of meditation and study would have created a harmonious community, with compassionate relationships. Instead, people still cling to their petty preferences and unexamined prejudices"

She continued to explain that Wai Mi, also, played a role in the problem. "She carries their blame because she sees no alternative to easing her terrible situation. Her desperate efforts to please them will never solve this problem. If it could, we wouldn't need to have this conversation."

"But there is no blame in this entire situation, either, as discomfoting as that may seem," Soyu Sei continued. "To assign blame one must know with certainty where a thing begins, and what is the beginning of any situation? All phenomena arise as the result of ever-changing causes and conditions that give rise to subsequent phenomena. Each situation we

encounter has its origin in beginningless time. We must seek to understand the deeper truths that govern our existence, and comprehend that every action we take, no matter how insignificant it appears, conditions the future. Nothing changes if we don't recognize that clearly. To become aware of our great responsibility as human beings is the path to our awakening. Unfortunately, in human relations, people seek to assign blame and avoid responsibility. But in reality, there is no blame, only responsibility.”

After his visit with Soyu Sei, Bho Li formulated a plan to base the community's study on understanding the implications of no blame, only responsibility. His intention was to awaken them to the futility of seeking an external source to blame for one's own mental vexations.

A very different Master Bho Li returned to the monastery from the one who left.

Bho Li met with Wai Mi first, and told her his plan of action. He hoped to win her willingness to stay longer and try to work things out. He got much more than that. Upon hearing the phrase, No Blame – Only Responsibility, Wai Mi achieved her awakening. She was Bho Li's first disciple to make the great breakthrough.

When he set the process in motion to grant her Dharma transmission, eight monks left in a huff. Dharma transmission would confirm Wai Mi as a teacher in her own right, and a successor in Master Bho Li's lineage. Bho Li remained unperturbed by the rebelling monks, inviting anyone else who was attached to and loved his delusions and prejudices more than the Dharma, to leave. Two more monks left. Bho Li reminded those who stayed of what the Buddha said when a significant number of his assembly departed as well: “It is better that they leave.”



Bho Li and the nine monks who remained, including Wai Mi, Sei Wot, and Noh Hui, settled into an unprecedented level of energy and commitment to the study of the Buddha's teaching. Wai Mi was like a wall of fire if the slightest unconscious infraction of anyone's intention was directed her way. One smoldering look, and the offending monk would quickly bow in apology and scurry off to study his own mind.

Other monks came and went in pursuit of the Dharma. Visiting different monasteries and studying with numerous teachers has always been common practice for training as a Zen monk. Bho Li's reputation spread throughout the countryside. Many monks, as well as laymen and women, visited to assess the level of truth to all the rumors that circulated about the vitality of Silent Thunder Monastery, and its abbot. More visitors left impressed with Bho Li's quick wit, profound wisdom, and unassuming demeanor, than those who detracted, and many stayed. The community grew, but its strength rested with the nine monks who remained after the time of Wai Mi's transmission.

As Bho Li approached the end of his life, he had to admit that he felt some remorse at being unable to assist more of the monks he loved so much to complete their understanding.

He began meeting with each disciple for longer periods of time, no matter how low his energy was. It was a time of great intimacy, first between Bho Li and each monk, and then among the monks with one another. They cried in each other's arms as it became evident that Bho Li's death was imminent.

Just weeks before his final passing, Bho Li met privately with Sei Wot and Noh Hui, and thanked them for their dedication. He told each monk of his admiration for him, and the important lesson each had taught him. *"Sei Wot, you taught me to pay closer attention to my intention."* *"Noh Hui, I learned from you not to forget what I don't know."*

Sei Wot and Noh Hui, upon hearing the phrase associated with himself, leapt the final barrier. The ceremony for their transmission was held as soon as preparations could be arranged.

Now Bho Li had three worthy disciples, and accomplishing that left him content. The community spent the remaining time together, reminiscing. There was a great deal of mirth, as various stories of the monastery's history were retold, and that delighted Bho Li. [As an aside he told me, *"Renshin, you tend toward seriousness. Please laugh more."*]

As his time grew closer, he retired to his quarters, attended by Wai Mi. It fell upon Sei Wot and Noh Hui to oversee the many needs of the monastery. The mood of the community was solemn, and each monk maintained a silent vigil in the performance of his duty. Sei Wot or Noh Hui frequently checked on Bho Li and his attendant, concerned for their needs.



Bho Li spent most of his time seated in meditation. As the hours passed, he withdrew more and more. Toward the very end, when his energy waned, he took to his sleeping mat. Sensing he was about to cross the threshold of the Great Mystery, he thought, *My whole life I've wondered about this moment*. Just before his passing, he thought he heard his cherished Firethroat, and spoke his last words ...

*A thousand fireflies
Draw the veil on this dream,
As the sweet song of the Firethroat
Calls me to awaken.*

As he took his last breath, Bho Li focused his entire heart-mind on answering the call. And then he flew away.



Noh Hui set out to tell Soyu Sei the news, and inform her that his memorial service would be three days hence.

Upon seeing him she said, “He’s gone.” Noh Hui nodded.

“Any last words?”

Noh Hui told her. She bowed her head slightly and he thought he saw her smile, but it may just have been the steam rising from her teacup in the flickering candlelight that made it seem that way. After a brief visit, and an obligatory cup of tea, he carefully rose to return to the monastery. There was much to do.

Sei Wot, Noh Hui, and Wai Mi met to determine how to carry on. It was decided that Sei Wot would become abbot of the monastery. Noh Hui and Wai Mi would wander the county-side in the tradition of the Buddha’s disciples, teaching the Dharma to any and all who asked about it.

The three shared their awakening experiences with each other, and each was moved by the others’ stories. The impact of each statement would have a lifelong effect on their practice and teaching. They considered them a foundation for a very practical practice:

Pay Attention to Your Intention

Don’t Forget What You Don’t Know

No Blame – Only Responsibility

The Tale of Zen Master Bho Li

Just two short weeks after Bho Li's funeral, Noh Hui and Wai Mi traveled the path down from the monastery, spending their first night out with Soyu Sei. They journeyed together for several days, then parted to go their separate ways. Each was comforted by the fact that they would both return to the monastery twice yearly to help with intensive training periods and special celebrations.



As for Soyu Sei, she spent less and less time on Li Mountain after Bho Li's passing. She continues to fulfill her Bodhisattva vows, deferring entrance to Nirvana until all beings realize their radiant Buddha-nature. According to Master Bho Li, she now wanders the world, assuming any form necessary to bring healing and compassion to the human heart, tirelessly committed to easing the world's sorrow.

Master Bho Li wants you to know that she is always available to those in need. Watch for her when you are most troubled and confused. Please remember, though, she rarely addresses the matter directly, and is apt to appear in a most unlikely disguise.



About the Author

Barbara Verkuilen began Zen practice in 1971 at the Chicago Zen Buddhist Temple with Soyu Matsuoka Roshi. She then studied under the guidance of Dainin Katagiri Roshi for 15 years. Following Katagiri Roshi's death in 1990, she continued formal training with his Dharma heir, Shoken Winecoff, by whom she was ordained in 1997.

Barbara and her husband Dale, also a Zen priest, co-founded the Midwest Soto Zen Community in 2001, based in Madison. Barbara holds a BA in Education and an MS in Counselor Education. She is also the author of *Dokusan with Dōgen: Timeless Lessons in Negotiating the Way*, available at Firethroat Press, www.FirethroatPress.com

About the Illustrator

Aron Gilmore is an illustrator who lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his beautiful fiancée, Rael, and their two cats. He graduated from Madison Area Technical College with an Associate's Degree in Graphic Design and Illustration in 2007. Other samples of his work can be viewed on his website, www.gilmoreart.com.

