

Louisa John-Krol

Envoys to the empress

Biographical note:

Louisa John-Krol is an established performer, releasing CDs of ethereal music on indie labels, travelling international festivals and publishing literature, such as a magic-realist fairy tale in *The Victorian Writer* (Dec 2015 – Jan 2016), fables and the poem ‘Twenty ways to greet a tiger’ in *Award Winning Australian Writing* (Melbourne Books 2011). She is about to release a soundtrack to her unfolding chronicles, *Elderbrook*, and has worked in education and storytelling. Having a B.A. and Dip.Ed., both from The University of Melbourne, Louisa revels in fairy-tale salons, rings and guilds.

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Creative writing – Storytelling – Fairy tale

Long ago my pard sent for a flock of paper birds. They flew on origami wings, cheeping messages in turn. The first said leave; the second, stay; the third hurry; the fourth tarry, whereupon each avian messenger burst into flame, fell and vanished. My pard gleaned that we should visit the empress of our neighbouring realm, to win the winged Sandals of Talaria¹, in exchange for finding her lost smile.

Yet Dulcinea was no ordinary empress. She was a giant snow-lion². No grander flounce of fur ever graced a throne. The ‘Envoys to the Empress’ told of how, for centuries, visitors to her palace had attempted this feat.

‘How?’ I protested. ‘From what I’ve heard, she’s as glum as a plum.’

‘A snow-plum,’ my pard cajoled, swirling her tail. ‘Sardathrion is rather cold.’

‘Dulcinea has a fine coat of fur.’

‘Indeed! It’s another warmth she needs.’

‘Come, remind me how emissaries, delegates and wayfarers have tried to make Dulcinea smile!’ Thus my pard recounted the legendary ‘Envoys to the Empress’:

‘Never sully my lineage with these antics!’ Dulcinea the snow-lion told the clowns who sported around her throne in vain efforts to make her smile. Sulking statues encircled them. A contrivance of columns soared so high they pierced the roofs of other galaxies. Treasures lined the walls – glass toadstools, menageries, mannequins of brocade studded with pearls, granite giants with snow-globe heads, steeds of morganite – and through a portico, a tree sprang from three roots: cypress, pine, and cedar. Aquariums sparkled with sea-dragons. These and other gifts spanned centuries, from many an envoy.

Consider The Dwarf of Barberry, who played poker with Dulcinea. ‘Pleasantries, your Grace’ said the dwarf, bowing with a flourish.

‘Majesty,’ corrected Dulcinea. ‘Though some call me The Magnificent Maelstrom.’ At this, the grooms of the royal chamber puffed their chests under robes of hummingbird down. The empress pouted, even as the dwarf let her win (actually, Dulcinea let him think he was letting her win, when she could beat anyone paws down in any game). Win or lose, he was but one in a long line. Many tried, and failed, to make Dulcinea smile.

Dervishes whirled around Dulcinea. If her eyelids lowered, she veiled her smile under seven whiskers.

Emperor Jingtai of the Zing Dynasty swept up to the throne in a silk robe embroidered with peacocks and lime leaves. He presented an orange. Dulcinea nibbled the rind. Upon Dulcinea’s tongue, no smile stirred. The emperor had not come alone. His consort peeled a mandarin with a pinky toe. Dulcinea stared at the toe.

Shang Yang, a rain bird, swooped for the fruit. Juice dropped from its beak to form four beasts: dragon, phoenix, unicorn, tortoise. Dulcinea watched them intently, chin resting on paws. She twirled the tip of her tail wistfully, but her smile stayed shy.

Palavers of Indillo prostrated themselves before her. Dulcinea admired one called Viravarman. How his hair shone! He brought a bearded beetle raised on rambutan fruit, plucked from plumes along coasts. Dulcinea blinked at the beard.

A camel trotted in with no rider, only a ball of tumbleweed bound to its saddle with gold cord. When Dulcinea yawned, the thorns split open to reveal a miniature village, where a cameleer stood by an ashram. Noticing Dulcinea wasn't smiling, he strode inside, dropped the flap of his tent door and clapped his hands. With that, the ball sprang shut in jaws of thorn. Dulcinea ordered that the camel be given a draught of water for its trouble. As the creature drank, three imps with gold caps leapt from its nostrils to parade around the rim of the bowl, each carrying a tray of emeralds. One imp fell, spilling his tray; an emerald rolled over the rim to the floor and split in half to reveal more gifts: torques, turquoise beakers of musk, the twirl of a moustache and thirty rolled carpets. The camel, which had red hair, went on drinking.

Hakims, apothecaries and other doctors arrived with jars of crushed aloe vera they called Keora, and a letter from the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, which a woodpecker had carried, and a scribe had intercepted. Out of respect, Dulcinea declined to read it. But she allowed a little Keora to be dabbed on her front right paw.

Denizens of Arill carried a compendium of legends, set with ruby studs and a latch made of dust from cliffs of Mount Qaf. The Emperor Shahpal, lord of jinns and fairies, sent a mirror, projecting his presence, but Dulcinea sent it back with her own reflection. She kept the book. Her advisers shook their heads, fearing enchantment: 'O Dulcinea, Philosopher-Queen! Do you suppose it is safe to read? What if it bears a tilism – a spell, sorcery, curse – to force you to surrender your smile, without feeling happy at all?'

Dulcinea waived their worries with a regal paw. 'If that is so, then Shahpal may be equally concerned that while I am reading it, I might change the meaning of words. He and I go back a long way.' Her tone held tact, even diplomacy.

Seekers travelled from the Empire of Seven Climes, blowing smoke lions from pipes. The face of their leader, Amir, resembled ruins of a rook. Sorcerers of Hoshruha followed. One claimed to have studied under the trickster Amar, and bore a bag of tricks to show for it, containing a world almost identical to Sardathrion, and all his trickster's livery. Inside that bag, some whispered, was a smile that might leap out to play on Dulcinea's lips. Yet a sphinx was in attendance, watching over proceedings with inscrutable eyes.

King Edling III of Ringland sent jesters and jugglers. They blew horns into each other's ears, cavorted and frolicked, with somersaults and pratfalls, jingling cap bells, pulling faces and blowing bubbles out of their bottoms. Dulcinea nearly smiled, but changed her mind when their wind altered direction.

A shapeshifting frog turned up, thirsty after hopping and swimming from the Andes in Ecuador. She showed Dulcinea how she could change her skin from spiny to smooth. Dulcinea's attendants lost no time fetching a bowl of water. The mutable rain frog caught sight of another amphibian in the reflection: an Alaskan woodfrog. This one had a trick, too. He could turn himself into a block of ice, even stop breathing. His heart had stopped beating, waiting to thaw in Spring. But Sardathrion was always cold. So he was

stuck in his ice-block, which was no smiling matter, until the other frog snuggled up to him. While everyone looked on in wonder, the Andean frog kissed the Alaskan frog. They married at the next banquet.

By that time, monks had arrived from the Himalayas in Bhutan. They carried brass and woven ornaments, wrapped in the whistling of pines by the plateau of the Hundred Thousand Fairies, and blessings of bodhisattvas and dakinis. It is rumoured that Dulcinea went away with them for a while, riding a tiger into the clouds. If her smile travelled too, that is a secret.

A fine fellow, Romulus, and his council, visited in 1480 riding a carriage that doubled as a throne. Snow cuffed his gown, which bore galaxies of stars. These were too bright for Dulcinea. Her eyelashes closed like curtains.

More envoys came, bearing a drop of sunlight from an earring of the Garuda with scarlet wings, beak and talons of a vulture, legs and body of a golden man. It had abstained from eating a cobra, so that Dulcinea might enjoy it. She kissed the sunbeam but did not eat the snake; instead, she ordered that it be divided between the poor, on the glaciers of Sardathrion. For this deed, many sheikhs and sibyls hailed her spiritual splendour.

A bird in a bowler hat struck a dashing pose, but its nostrils were too keen. Dulcinea unrolled her tongue like a red ribbon and yawned.

Lady Throgmorton from another clime and time consulted wizards to obtain perfect love to make a snow-lion smile; yet she was mistaken. Dulcinea preferred imperfection.

A balladeer threw a Flemish cornflower at Dulcinea's feet. Dulcinea sniffed, settled her nose between her paws, and fell asleep. The romancer fainted. Dulcinea's servants carried him down a corridor of opulent panelling. They placed him on a sofa stuffed with feathers, where he dreamed for a decade.

An imp brought rose wine in ruby encrusted cups. In an apron she carried a ringtail possum. Its tail wound around Dulcinea's paw, prompting a nod from the snow-empress.

A troll carried a basket with almond flowers of Mallorca. Dulcinea nestled into them and sighed. This envoy tried to rouse the empress. 'Your majesty, I seek congress with you.' Yet those snowy brows were knitted in sleep.

A bunyip scrubbed its belly till it shone, round as a pudding basin, bright as a billabong. Dulcinea wrinkled her nose like wattle. She suggested he might do with more fur.

A pirate brought a ship with hoarfrost diamonds in the rigging, its deck awash with seaweed, sails studded with chestnuts. At a kick, rubies poured onto planks laced with velvet. Dulcinea ignored the gems, but praised the skull and crossbones on the pirate's hat. The pirate returned the compliment. 'Such volume of fur you have! Scintillating!' Dulcinea kept her eyes on the hat, until her purr became a growl. Eventually the pirate took off his hat and gave it to Dulcinea, who wore it for the rest of the week.

Manu, an island chief, arrived in his prime, famed for grinding a ball into coconut powder and kicking a crumb over ten palm trees growing one-on-the-other. He presented Dulcinea with smiling salmon, splashing in a cove of canoes, each filled with

kava so hot it would make a salamander squirm. But Dulcinea had dined on fish that morning. She was now in a poultry mood.

The Prince of the Psaltery of Ploom drew a clock in the air with clove-scented smoke. Dulcinea made an angry tick tock of her tail, for she did not care to measure time.

Two Tengu goblins pushed a wheel spoked with sprigs of cherry blossom. Dulcinea gave it a spin, and that was that.

Madame Defarge of Flange brought a skein of knitting and two bones, stitching the coat of arms of an aristocrat in need of a scratch. Dulcinea's claws uncoiled; but her smile remained sheathed.

Admirals and brigadiers came by threes. Dukes came two by two. Earls came early. Lattice trimmers came late. Magicians carried zambils. Chamberlains, cantors and chancellors chattered, taking their chances. Ambassadors ambled, with more time than a lion. A baroness and a countess followed, joined at the hip by a stick of liquorice. Viziers and fakirs slapped their thighs in unison. When that failed to impress anyone, they pulled crystal pistols from the folds of their vestments and squirted snowberry juice. One cheated by opening a parasol, and it was all over. Many observers noticed the parasol was made of light. It sported stripes with green and gold rays. Which just goes to show you shouldn't wear pyjamas on your head, or you could be mistaken for an umbrella.

There came the Air Commodore of Sly. His sleeves were trimmed in ermine along every edge, even its shadows, where a linnets sang, for only Dulcinea to hear.

'The empress is generous! She prefers to share her songs!' So said her guardians, signalling the door.

Also came Puan Pep, Tan Sri Datuk, Lord Laugh-a-Lot, Sir Grin, Tuan Haji, Yang Amat, Pip, B'r'er Rabbit and a Rabbi of Revelry, none of them any closer to provoking a smile than other dignitaries. And it was all Your Excellency this, and Your Eminence that, as Dulcinea twirled her ears in circles. There was much genuflecting and grovelling. To no effect whatsoever. Some fell upon their Majesty's neck with kisses. No smile came of this.

Allies from Anvard brought a basket of snow-bellied kittens. Dulcinea nuzzled each fur ball. If she smiled, nobody saw.

Next came the Chuan-T'ou: disembodied heads with batwings and beaks of birds, offering raw fish. Dulcinea thanked them, but no smile passed her lips.

Someone brought a Rukh's feather. Dulcinea sent it on to an explorer, Maggie Polo, to give to the Grand Khan of his estimation.

'Felicitation, Empress Dulcinea!' So said another luminary, whom nobody had met before, nor would again.

'Who might you be?' asked Dulcinea.

'Felicity.'

'Anything else?'

‘No.’

‘Very well. Next?’

From Kuching, the City of Cats, came a blood-orange tom with no tail. Dulcinea boxed his ears, then shared a dish of jellied fish from the Sarawak River with him.

There strode a proud, regal fellow, heavily robed, with heavier eyebrows. Behold! It was Sultan Shaharyar with his storyteller, Scheherazade, wrapped in gold leaves from Mazanderan. She told enthralling tales, moving Dulcinea’s tail to flip back and forth with agitation to know the ending of each saga: stories within stories within stories, for a thousand and one nights. Dulcinea pummelled and smurgled her paws into cushions of listening. Yet instead of a smile, she gave a sigh that flickered into the air like smoke of a djinn.

‘Seems to me,’ I interjected, ‘The world comes to Dulcinea. Does Dulcinea come to the world? Has she ever repaid any visits?’

‘As I hinted earlier,’ purred my pard, ‘She once made a journey, perhaps her only one. She went to Bhutan. To Taktshang Goemba.’ This struck me as familiar, for one of the envoys came from there. My pard continued: ‘I mean Tiger’s Nest Monastery. In those caves of paintings on pedestals, bridges and butter lamps, she met a guru with eight names. It is said Dulcinea gazed across Paro Valley, where moss hung from flags in pine forests. Rumour has it that she rode a tiger. It would have been a very large one. Yet she never speaks of this tryst, if it happened at all.’

We drifted into a shared dream, in which a bumblebee appeared in a Temple Cloud, calling herself Tilly. She whispered that a magician held her captive, and that she pined for her best friend: the Snow-lion of Sardathrion. Dulcinea! When we awoke, my pard and I set off for the temple, which we surmised must be in Bhutan. After much hardship we rescued Tilly the Bumblebee, with help from one in a thousand fairies. How we did so is another story.

We bore our quarry to Empress Dulcinea, hidden under my cap. A sentry sat on the portcullis that opened the castle gate, lifting iron spikes above our heads. After our passage between two watchtowers, it lowered again, striking the paving with a clang. Yet now the castle receded into the distance. The faster we strode, the farther off the castle moved. Thrice it vanished altogether, returning at a more distant point. I razed the snowdrifts with my strides, drawing my fur collar closer to my throat. I had become an envoy to the empress!

A door in the hill, operated by a legerdemain, opened to a pentacle of anterooms, leading to the Throne Room of Dulcinea, wainscotted in jade, lit by candles in sconces. There she sat, the grandest accomplishment of fur I had ever seen.

‘Munificent Magnificence!’ I exclaimed. ‘Or Magnificent Munificence?’

‘Try Munificent Magnificent Majesty,’ prompted my pard. Hearing this, Tilly the bumblebee giggled from her hiding place. A courtier stared my cap. The flap of the cap wobbled. The courtier frowned. Just in time, the monarch beckoned with a raised paw. As Empress Dulcinea greeted us, a bearded snow-beetle sprinkled her whiskers with rosewater, essence of musk, mint and restoratives.

‘What a bug!’ I whispered to my pard. ‘Look at its back!’ For its shoulders and spine, vaulted with a beetle’s carapace for armour, shone. Meanwhile the great snow-lion, Dulcinea, exuded millennial ownership of her crown, or rather tiara, which sank into her fluff when she yawned. Her caparisoned throne was more of a room than a seat. A canopy of pearls hung over her head, from which her voice floated, as if a snowflake could purr. ‘Welcome, strangers. Be ready to receive your regal, royal, robust replies.’

‘Be praised!’ enjoined an imp.

‘Dulcify the Dossier!’ sighed a clerk. He held a pile of reports for signing. His beard was a scroll, his ears were erasers, his nose a pencil sharpener, his eyes staplers that pinned you to the spot. On his hat was a monogram: G.I.

‘What does G.I. stand for?’ I enquired.

‘Gold Initials,’ he replied.

‘Everyone sit,’ Dulcinea ordered. ‘As is our custom, we’ll start with a riddle for our guests.’ She tilted her head toward a sphinx that crouched behind her. Inscrutable eyes gleamed from a human face framed by a feline mane.

The sphinx’s voice rumbled. ‘My question is for our taller guest.’

I gulped. No wisecracks occurred to me. The only crack was the stone sound of the sphinx. ‘What stays and vanishes when you stand up?’

I cast my mind over memory, until something surfaced. ‘Your lap.’

The courtiers grinned. The Bumblebee buzzed.

The sphinx growled. ‘I don’t have a lap. I’ve never sat, nor stood. I’ve been crouching since the beginning of time, as I will till the end. Yet your answer is correct.’

At this, Dulcinea nodded, thanked her sphinx and addressed us thus: ‘Dine with a lion! Never let it be said our parlours are as cold as our pinnacles.’

I raised my cap. Tilly the Bumblebee clung to the rim, hidden in the fold of the flap. My gesture seemed disrespectful. Gasps filled the room. For a terrible moment, I thought the empress might swipe me with one of her paws. Then out flew Tilly. She shone like a dart. She twirled, zig-zagged around my head, whirred her wings, somersaulted, shimmied side to side and whirled like a belly in a hoola hoop. By now gasps, grunts and grumbles had turned to shouts of surprise.

An imp blurted, ‘Hail home, Tilly the bumblebee!’

The bee sped towards her friend, Empress Dulcinea, the Sardathrion snow-lion. The millennia that had kept them apart melted into legend. Dulcinea’s smile was beatific, calm, embodied. Joy crackled around the throne. The snowcat’s teeth shone so brightly, they rolled the honour of pearls into snow.

In the next moment, Dulcinea slipped off her throne with a miaow between a squeal and a chirrup, and sashayed toward the bee, who hovered mid-air, in line with her nose. The empress faced the bee. The bee faced the empress. Dulcinea smiled, the smile of a lion. Tilly grinned, the grin of a bee. The lion bunted the bee. The bee bumped the lion.

After bonny bunting and bumble bumping, they made their way back to the throne together, the bee perched on the lion's nose: little on large.

I wondered how to ask Empress Dulcinea for the Sandals of Talaria. According to legend, she kept them under her throne. It was impossible to tell, underneath so many layers of silk, satin and wool, whether anything was there at all. Obviously, Hand them over your Highness! might be a bit rude. We've done our part - now it's your turn! probably wasn't much better. How might we cajole the snow-lion to fulfil her pledge: that if anyone could make her smile, they'd win the winged sandals? My pard threw a nod in Dulcinea's direction, as if to say listen and learn, for the empress had remembered her part of the bargain: she dangled one snowy front limb downward. Along her cushion's edge was a fringe like a cat's eyelash. She tapped a tassel. Out rolled a round hatbox. Dulcinea tapped again, this time on the box. It sprang open in a puff of velvet. Inside was a silk bonnet, within which lay a pair of sandals, sparkling like frost. Dulcinea's smile grew brighter, not for the footwear, nor for the bonnet (which she bade me fasten over her tiara), but for the bee that crept into it. As I tied the ribbons, my pard winked and swiped the sandals.

'No need to stand on ceremony! Dulcinea has signalled her intention to play. Her Majesty wishes to carouse with her friend. As far as she is concerned, the Talaria are now our responsibility – which means they are no longer hers.' By now, Tilly the bumblebee was riding inside Dulcinea's bonnet³.

Barbershop seals chorused in a semi-circle around the throne. Balconies and balustrades shook. Floors and stairs that once sagged in sadness, now pounded with pomp. The palace rang with laughter.

Later, I pulled off my boots and slipped into bed. My pard leapt up and slid under the blanket, nestling by my chest, her chin on my wrist. Sweet memories assailed our slumber: When joy arrived, it came not as a single spy, but in battalions. When Dulcinea smiled, all the armies of Sardathrion fell on one knee.

Aphorism: Every empress needs a bee in her bonnet.

Notes

1. The Talaria are the winged sandals of the Greek god Hermes, whose Roman name is Mercury. I am interested in the presence of magic shoes, slippers, boots or sandals in fairy tales, as devices for moving through time and space, or traversing hierarchies and other states of being. It is fitting that the Graeco-Roman Messenger god would wear them, not only as a deity of communication, but also as a psychopomp, who guides souls through the underworld (Kerényi 1987). His contradictory aspect intrigues me: that he can be a guardian – often evoked as a statue to protect homes from burglars – while also being the patron of thieves. Presumably it takes one to stop one. He also disguises lovers in their trysts, and protects the persecuted as they flee from danger. As a trickster he is a divine deceiver, at ease in the world of riddles. Although he does not appear overtly in my fairy tale, the coveting of his legendary Sandals of Talaria implies his involvement. Furthermore, the term 'Hermaphrodite' is part of his legacy, so there is every reason to believe that a female feline/fey-lion empress, Dulcinea the Snow-lion, with her elusive smile, could be a personification – or rather, catification – of Hermes.

2. Dulcinea, presiding over an icy realm, embodies the Manx mountain goddess Caillagh ny Groamagh (Caillagh ny Gueshag, Cailleach Bera, or Cailleach Bheur), who controls the weather (Briggs 1977: 58, 477) as well as the Giant Cat (Briggs 1977: 60, 465, 466). She finds her doppelgänger in the narrator's pard, a magical leopard. Meanwhile, Tilly the Bumblebee hints at being a fairy in the form of an insect (Briggs 1977: 470), in which case her entrapment in a Temple Cloud signals 'The capture of a fairy' (Briggs 1977: 463, 464, 475), from which she is eventually freed, signalling 'Rescue of prisoners from fairy stronghold' (Briggs 1977: 481). My story includes 'visits to fairy dwellings' (Briggs 1977: 463) in the form of a shifting palace inhabited by a talking snow-lion, sphinx, imps and other fey creatures. The realm itself is named Sardathrion, after a place in *Time And The Gods* (Dunsany 1906). The challenge, to make an empress smile, harkens to 'Impossible Tasks' (Briggs 1977: 480) in fairy tales. It is through careful attention to detail that our protagonist and her pard solve this problem. Memory and inspiration are linked, after all. Mnemosyne is the mother of the muses. Fairy tales themselves are mnemonic; their memes travel as seeds through time, like the envoys to the empress, bearing the gifts and dreams of civilisations.
3. Partial inspiration for Tilly the Bumblebee came from a pantomime by James Robinson Planché (1796–1880) entitled *The bee and the orange tree* (1879):

Oh! a great big bouncing bee,
Came buzzing out ere touch the flow'r I could!
And stung me dreadfully.

I enjoyed its puns; the Countess speaks of the Battle of the Bees: 'Jason won the Golden Fleas'. A Fairy remarks 'Bee and Tree, be as you were before', while 'Bee-attitude' ('beatitude') possibly prompted my choice of adjective for Dulcinea's smile: 'beatific'.

Research statement

Research background

This contemporary fairy tale explores possibilities of intercultural problem-solving, by crossing temporal and geographical boundaries. The work presents a nuanced response to the tension between nationalism and multiculturalism across global politics. Whilst this fairy tale's focus is not didactic, it nevertheless implies that we might find solutions to life's conundrums by cultivating curiosity, particularly when confronting contradiction, grief or hardship. As we learn from A.S. Byatt's story 'Crocodile tears', one can 'look with curiosity, and live' (1999: 40).

Research contribution

The narrative explores Warner's proposal that fairy tales occupy a secondary, liminal world, which overlaps with our own; it highlights her proposition that a fairy tale may tamper with geographical or temporal boundaries.

Research significance

The work makes an original contribution by exploring manifold attempts to delight a powerful being, depicting the quest of artists to elicit a response.

Turning around The Name of the Helper motif, in the Aarne-Thompson classification (AT500), in which a lone girl has to guess an imp's name, my quest requires a multitude of envoys to make a single female ruler smile. The work presents knowledge about intercultural cross-pollination of fairy tales, in the symbol of a bee, which in Graeco-Roman tradition is associated with Muses. Concurring with Barbara Bolt's contention that creative contributors to scholarly discourse need not abide by the 'shock of the new', and are instead 'open to what emerges in the interaction with the materials of practice' (Bolt 2004), I have delved avidly into traditional sources. For example, Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy tale 'The white cat' (1892) provides a clue as to how an Australian of Anglo-Celtic/European descent might overcome xenophobia, by embracing the unfamiliar with curiosity, and taking aesthetic delight in the lushness of hybrid influences.

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