



A
DREAM
WANTS
WAKING

a novel

LYDIA KWA

In 2219 CE, many years after the Great Catastrophe, the Central Government of Luoyang has divided the city into zones where inhabitants, both human and chimeric, are placed by usefulness. The citizens of the city are overseen by No. 1, a giant chimeric brain created by the scientists in Bright Order to monitor all activity within the city while distracting the residents with virtual spectacles. But No. 1 has begun to behave erratically. Meanwhile, the Spirit Supreme Assembly in Interstitium, a religious order with a dangerous new leader, continues to grow in power, sanctioned by the Central Government. The city's only hope lies with Yinhe, a half-human half-fox spirit who has lived many lives and hides truths in tales shared with listeners in Bent Back. Summoned to Dream Zone, where chimeric inhabitants of the city have been exiled to perform hard labour, Yinhe is given information that may create great change in the city and stave off an ancient enemy.

Weaving a silken web of Chinese myth, speculative fiction and storytelling, Lydia Kwa has brilliantly realized a future where questions of sentience, of personhood and of the truth of dreams wrap around a timeless quest for freedom and for love.

A DREAM WANTS WAKING

Also by Lydia Kwa

FICTION

The Chuanqi Duology

Oracle Bone

The Walking Boy

Pulse

This Place Called Absence

POETRY

The Colours of Heroines

sinuous



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A Buckrider Book

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For our non-human kin

*We came to this empty husk of a holy place not to pray,
but to reside in the space between life and myth.*

– Clara Chow, *Modern Myths*

In all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order.

– Carl Jung, *The Collected Works*

*In novs fert animus mutatas
dicere formas corpora*

Changes of shape, new forms, are the theme which my spirit
impels me
now to recite.

– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Luoyang, 2219 CE

YINHE/UNKNOWN WAYFARER
half-human, half-fox spirit

END DECODER
de facto leader of Dream Zone

SEKA
assistant to End Decoder

GUI
demon

PHOEBE
Yinhe's earth mother

STANLEY OUYANG
Yinhe's earth father

NO.1
chimeric brain at Central Government headquarters

WEN FANG
scientist at Central Government headquarters

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

(continued)

Tang China, 644–904 CE

BAOSHI

disciple of Harelip

ARDHANARI

sculptor

XUANZANG

monk, translator of sutras

LING

abbess of Da Fa Temple

PROLOGUE

At twilight, the wind livens up. It scatters detritus through the streets, rattles windowpanes and sneaks through gaps to get inside houses. I walk down these familiar alleys in Bent Back, an anomaly even among outsiders.

The wind knows my secret – that I am a fox spirit still searching for the one I lost many lifetimes ago. The wind teases and cajoles. *There will be a storm later, but there's still time.*

The regulars of Storytelling Night, dressed in their costumes, are waiting for me. When I arrive in their presence, I will light a candle and spin a fable spanning across time and space. I do this in defiance of the age of erasures.

Ahead, flickers of light pierce the darkening sky. The rusty shop sign whinges as I draw close. I can smell the heat of excitement.

Unknown Wayfarer

A dark, atmospheric painting of a stormy sea under a cloudy sky. The sky is filled with heavy, dark clouds, and a bright light source, possibly the moon or a low sun, is visible in the upper left quadrant, casting a soft glow. The sea below is turbulent, with white-capped waves and a dark, swirling pattern. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

BOOK ONE

幽室

(youshi)

Hidden Room

Start of Spring

First Lunar Month

904 CE

THE ROAD BETWEEN CHANG'AN AND LUOYANG

Two diminutive figures crouch behind a row of sumac bushes midway on the south slope. Under the crescent moon, they're enveloped in darkness. Below them, the wide path is animated by shadowy movements. The onlookers have been keeping vigil for hours, watching tens of thousands of humans pass by. Boots crunch against rocky ground.

Snowfall, light but consistent, covers the humans with a mantle of white, yet it doesn't settle on the two observers, passing through them instead.

To the west lies Chang'an smouldering in flames, a red cipher burning through the night. The metallic scent of grief permeates the exiles' bodies.

The fox spirits tilt their heads at almost the same time and their noses move in concert, sniffing the air. Ears perked, they tune into the disparate sounds coming from the ancient road. Some footsteps are heavy, anger irresolutely stomping against uneven terrain; others' gaits are faltering. Then there are those whose walking betrays an absence, as if their souls have already abandoned them.

There seems to be no end to this procession of absolute misery. Small children, the elderly and the infirm are borne on the backs of men and women. There's the occasional sighting of a dog or cat riding on carts. Someone stumbles while another simply sits or lies on the ground, helpless.

The fox spirits finally break their silence.

"Mama, what will become of these humans?"

"All it takes is the folly of one power-crazed human to wreak havoc and cause devastation for countless others."

"Who has done this?"

"Zhu Wen, a warlord hell-bent on seizing power."

The younger fox spirit stares down at the exiles and sighs. “Can’t we do something to help them?”

The older fox gazes tenderly at her daughter, at the soft silver streak that marks the pelt down her back. She remains quiet for twelve slow breaths before answering. “I’m not sure there’s anything we could do right now.”

Soldiers on horseback pass by on either side of the procession, shouting, “Keep moving! You can’t stop until we reach Luoyang.”

A child trips and falls down on the road almost directly in front of, and below, the fox spirits’ vantage point. A soldier pulls out a whip from his saddlebag and strikes the child repeatedly on the face. The child screams in anguish. Blood streaks from their wounds. The soldier’s face is marked by a chilling expression of pleasure. Three more soldiers join in. Meanwhile, others rush to shield the child.

The young fox spirit launches off toward the road. Sticky filaments exude from her claws and envelop the four soldiers in an impenetrable web. She yanks them off their horses and leaves them imprisoned in the net. She moves up and down the length of the procession, trapping the remaining soldiers in the same fashion.

By the time the fox spirit settles back into place next to her mother, there’s a fiery glint in her eyes. “You know I hate sitting around doing nothing.”

“Indeed, dearest. Just being yourself.”

Shouts of surprise and delight travel up and down the path.

“Wah liao – some kind of magic?”

“Did you see? Looked like a fox!”

“But it wasn’t evil! How can – ?”

“Maybe some are okay, huh? Good spirits about!”

“Huat ah! Heaven has intervened!”

The exiles resume their march forward, except two men who pause at a large boulder on the side of the road. One of them uses a hammer and chisel to carve the rock. The sharp noise of his efforts rises above the rumble of the travellers.

The mother fox spirit's whiskers twitch excitedly. "Hmmm, curious. I wonder what that man is up to?"

The daughter fox spirit gazes in the direction of the Western capital instead. "Chang'an is no more. All that grandeur, all the liveliness of its inhabitants, the temples and monasteries, the libraries."

"Of course, sweetness, you can't help but feel sad." Her daughter cares about Chang'an while the mother fox spirit, on the other hand, is averse to cities. She can't survive for long in places with large aggregations of humans, unlike her daughter. She recalls her former life with Xie two hundred and fifty years earlier, how she managed to survive and thrive living in the countryside. She bares her fangs, uncomfortable with the memory.

"Sometimes I don't know what to do with my sadness," the daughter says.

Her mother replies, "We keep returning, even though we've achieved immortality. Nobody tells us to reincarnate; it's not inevitable. There are other fox spirits who just want to do mischief and have some fun. But to love means we must be willing to suffer."

"Yes, Mama, you're right. We return because we have a wish to complete something we couldn't do in a previous life. Love compels us to do more."

A few travellers pause to see what the carver is doing. The fox spirits notice that the mood in the procession seems to have changed. A few begin to sing. Then more join in. The music rises up against the dark and cold, competing with the wind.

"Listen, Mama, it's that ancient ode."

*The reeds flourish, lush
White dew still falling
My beloved, so dear
Wanders lost along the shoreline
Upriver I search for him
The journey, long and tortuous*

*The reeds luxuriant, green
 White dew turns to frost
 My beloved, so dear
 Drifts beyond the waters
 Upriver I search for her
 The journey, long and arduous*

“Mmm, I’ve always loved this song. Don’t you, Mama?”

The mother fox spirit nods. “Yes, I certainly do, my dear. The song reminds us of our connection to humans, especially the nurturers.”

Both fox spirits warmly recall that this melody has been sung by women while they labour in the fields, on the rivers or in their homes. Through the ages, peasant women pray to the White Fox Goddess in order to conceive. The women also leave food out for birds, foxes and rodents, and sometimes tend to injured animals.

The daughter fox spirit lowers her head slightly and narrows her eyes until they’re mere slits. An ache spreads through her, and she growls. “I can’t forget how I failed one human in particular. I must find a way to right that wrong.”

Her mother responds, “You’re thinking of your last incarnation in Chang’an as Qilan, the Daoist nun, aren’t you?”

“I can’t shake that image out of my mind – young Ling at the auction in the town of Huazhou. The first time I saw her, I had such a strong feeling of . . . I don’t know what to call it . . .”

The mother fox spirit returns to their conversation, a glint in her eyes. “To love is to suffer, but to love is also to discover. You’re saying that you’d be willing to reincarnate a few lifetimes, for however long it takes, until you find her?”

“Yes, Mama, that’s what I’m going to do.” She falls into a familiar moroseness – is she being foolish? She exhales a stream of purple mist as she shakes her head vigorously. “I must believe that love will triumph against all odds.”

“Only the purest kind of love, which possesses a beauty invisible to many.”

She ponders her mother's comment. One has to learn how to discern the truth, separate the real from the illusory.

Her mother adds, "Then there's the opposite."

"What opposite?"

"The opposite of love – the demonic . . ."

"You mean Gui?"

"Not only Gui – it's just one demon among many. They are outwardly beautiful or, if not, charismatic, promising to save humans from their suffering. But that kind of illusion is neither true beauty nor loving."

First Escape from the Underworld

Seventh-Century Tang Dynasty

KUIXING TEMPLE, OUTSIDE CHANG'AN

Gui waits and watches from its imprisonment in the Underworld. The demon extends tendrils of its mind stream through minuscule gaps in the straitjacket cocoon, projecting up, up, up – past thick layers of poisoned legacies, buried truths and karmic narratives – to rupture the earth's surface.

To stir up mischief, the demon projects an ethereal presence through a portal at the abandoned temple. Humans in the area and beyond have heard about a powerful spirit that can grant wishes. Some are emboldened by their need and venture to the temple.

Gui sneers at each supplicant. Such naivety – they think all temples have good energy. Although trapped in the Underworld, Gui projects its voice and illusory benevolent form through the temple's portal, not totally satisfying in the long run. *A whiff of steak, but no real meat. Lousy!*

The demon fulfills the wishes of the supplicants but always exacts a price – some subsequent illness in the family, mental derangement, the person eventually overcome by wanton, excessive lusts or the death of a beloved child. *You ask big, you pay big.*

Then it has an idea. These days, a lot of fox spirits are thriving out in the countryside with a handful of the females attached to human males of the scholar class. The demon hatches a plan – use a spell to weaken the fox spirit, bring her to the brink of death, then capitalize on the human’s vulnerability to exact payment in exchange for “curing” their beloved.

After some searching, it locates two fox spirits – a mother and her daughter – living in human form. Gui notices that the daughter is a half-fox, half-human. It causes the daughter to fall into an incapacitating feverish state. The physician who arrives at their home pronounces the daughter’s condition dire. Her father, Xie, is desperate enough to come to the abandoned temple to seek help. Gui convinces Xie that it could heal his daughter if he only would agree to be possessed. With great anguish, the man agrees.

Grain Rain

Middle of Third Lunar Month

750 CE

DA FA TEMPLE, CHANG’AN

Ling is alone in the study. It has been raining for several days, but she isn’t sure exactly how many. There’s no sign of it abating, yet this afternoon’s rain seems gentler, making pattering sounds on the tiles of the temple roof. That steady rhythm soothes her as she reclines on the daybed, swaddled in blankets. She has left the door to the courtyard slightly ajar so that the refreshing smell of water against stone and the evocative scent of wet bark reaches her.

She’s incredulous that she has lived such a long time. Sister Xu tells her she’s probably now 104. Sister Xu is closer to 108. They’re fondly known as the Ancient Duo in the temple.

So much has happened in the world of the Tang court, but she and the other Daoist nuns have been safe from those court and palace intrigues with the exception of that time when she

had to exorcise those ghosts for Wu Zetian, the female emperor. She chuckles thinking about this.

The rain stops, and patches of sunlight appear, lending a sublime beauty to the plants and shrubs in the courtyard garden. The leaves of the camellia shrub glisten, while the yellow hearts of blushing pink blossoms reveal a hint of the rain. To Ling's eyes, the canopied shapes of the ancient pine attest to careful tending by generations of nuns before her. She smiles, aware that the pine will outlast her, many years into the future. Two white butterflies flit among the azalea bushes.

Ling cherishes these simple delights. She closes her eyes, breathes deeply, savouring every moment. Since Qilan left, there hasn't been a day that Ling hasn't thought of her former mentor.

Ling recalls the first lesson that her mentor demonstrated – the rapid metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly within a matter of seconds and then reversing it. Ling was only fourteen then, and the lesson in the garden occurred just days after Qilan brought her into the temple. Ling laughs wistfully at the memory – how she panicked when the caterpillar crawled under her mentor's sleeve; how stunned she was when the butterfly emerged on her palm when she reached in, and when the delicate creature disappeared and became the caterpillar again.

That lesson opened her eyes and mind – that beyond conventional notions of existence the uncommon could be summoned. What she had previously believed was unchangeable could be dismantled under the right conditions. Since then, she has lived fully trusting the presence of the strange and the marvellous.

I loved her with an ardent devotion. There – she has whispered it inside her heart-mind. No one else can hear it, and her secret is safe. It was not a sexual love, but it was as if her soul, once she met Qilan, longed to be with her for all eternity.

A soft knock at the door startles Ling out of her reverie.

“Enter.”

“Your Reverence,” the young nun begins as she bows to Ling, “they’ve been creating numerous flower arrangements in the main hall in preparation for tomorrow’s celebration.”

The novice – who cannot be more than thirteen or fourteen – brings in a bouquet and skilfully arranges the flowers in a vase, which she places on the desk. The arrangement of white camellia blooms and a few sprigs of juniper is modest but arresting. Ling watches her and chortles quietly. *Who knows if I'll still be alive for the celebration?* She shifts from her semi-prone position on the daybed to sit fully upright. Her gaze drifts to the camphor cabinet on the far wall. Two objects she particularly cherishes are stored there: a scroll with the poems that Shangguan Wan'er wrote and the object that Qilan left in her care. The novice is about to leave when Ling signals to her.

“Open that cabinet. Then the drawer at the bottom . . . yes, that's right. Remove it completely. Now reach in, feel for the second drawer behind it. There's a scroll inside and next to it an object wrapped in cloth. Bring that object to me.”

After the novice has departed, Ling unwraps the oracle bone and lets it rest in her palms. It remains a mystery why Qilan would leave it with her. Her mentor's last words were *Dear heart, we will meet again. Take care of the oracle bone until I return for it.*

She feels the need to hold the oracle bone – it's the most intimate and palpable tie to her mentor. Small, it nicely fits into her cupped hands, its weight surprisingly light for such a powerful presence. A light tan brown turtle plastron, its faint lines show where the bony scales had fused together. Then those mysterious squiggly lines on the dorsal surface whose meaning she learned from Qilan. *A dream wants waking, a sky needs light.*

She recalls the things that Qilan told her. This turtle plastron never behaved like all the others before and since. It couldn't be penetrated by the burin, nor would it crack when subjected to fire. All other plastrons used for divination purposes would obey the laws of nature and crack when subjected to fire just where a hole was made.

Ling gazes down at the turtle plastron and feels a familiar fondness. Qilan told her that the plastron belonged to Ao, the divine turtle who created the world. She sighs and closes her eyes. The oracle bone starts to throb in her hands. It feels like the most

natural thing in the world, this intimate relationship between her and it. She's that young girl again, the one who had been stunned to encounter its magic.

She looks down at the oracle bone – the lines of the ancient Tibetan script begin to glow. This hadn't ever happened before. How wonderful – the oracle bone is still capable of surprising her.

Two days later, the morning after the grand birthday celebration, Ling dozes off on the daybed in the study and dreams of Qilan. They're at the edge of an ocean. The salty air invigorates her. She feels happy just simply standing next to her mentor. Warmth infuses her whole person from head to toe as she studies Qilan's profile, with its beloved ferocity and strength.

Qilan is talking to her while she points to a place in the far distance. It's a cloudless day, yet the sky has a pale cast to it – the colour of sand, intensifying until it transforms into a bright yellow. After what seems like a long time, the ocean surface ripples, forming a deep rent. Ling feels growing unease. Qilan's form dissolves.

Ling wakes up with a fright. She places the back of her right hand against her forehead. It's cold, damp with sweat. Her left hand feels around the side of her bed. She relaxes when she touches the familiar shape. The oracle bone is still there.

She feels a sudden change in the air, like a breeze but subtler. She looks toward the door to the garden. A shimmering form intensifies as it approaches. She cries out in recognition, "Qilan, it's you!"

"Dear Ling – I'm here, as promised."

Ling struggles to sit upright. "I'm not dreaming . . . can this be real?"

Qilan comes quickly to Ling's side. "I'm crossing between dimensions to appear to you. You've done so well taking care of the temple all these years."

"Did you know about the potions those alchemists made for Wu Zhao? I had to allow them to take up space here."

“Such mundane alchemy was apt for those times. What better choice did you have in the light of Wu Zhao’s insistence? By agreeing to her demands, you protected Da Fa Temple from censure or punishment.”

Ling’s voice cracks with emotion. “You knew.”

“I know everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yes. I’ve been watching over you all these years.”

Ling’s face colours slightly. She feels awkward. Was Qilan watching her while she carried on her affair with the imperial secretary Shangguan Wan’er?

“Why haven’t you shown yourself until now?”

“It would have distracted you from living your life. Now you are soon to pass from this realm.” Qilan strokes Ling’s cheek with such tenderness that Ling’s eyes quickly fill with tears. Qilan’s hand is warm against her cheek.

A tremor of joy spreads through Ling. “Finally, this moment has arrived! Why did you leave the plastron with me all these years when you could have taken it with you when you left?”

“There’s a critical difference between length of time and timing. This is the right time, because you and the oracle bone are meant to travel together.”

Ling smiles at this thought. “Where will you take me?”

“You’ll see. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid. You taught me to be brave. You took fear out of me that last day, when I had to utter the spell to release you.”

Qilan smiles. “Dearest, because you loved me, you didn’t hesitate. I know it caused you a great deal of anguish to do it. You released me from my physical body when I needed to go.”

Tears well up in Ling’s eyes. “I’ll never forget.”

“Come with me.” Qilan places her hand tenderly on Ling’s head as she uses the same spell to liberate her.



Lydia Kwa was born in Singapore but moved to Toronto to begin studies in Psychology at the University of Toronto in 1980. After finishing her graduate studies in Clinical Psychology at Queen's University in Kingston, she moved to Calgary, Alberta; then to Vancouver, and has lived and worked here on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples since 1992.

Kwa has published two books of poetry (*The Colours of Heroines*, 1992; *sinuous*, 2013) and four novels (*This Place Called Absence*, 2000; *The Walking Boy*, 2005 and 2019; *Pulse*, 2010 and 2014; and *Oracle Bone*, 2017). A third book of poetry, *from time to new*, will be published by Gordon Hill Press in fall 2024.

She won the Earle Birney Poetry Prize in 2018 and her novels have been nominated for several awards, including the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction.

She has also exhibited her artwork at Centre A (2014) and Massy Arts Gallery (2018); and has self-published two poetry-visual art chapbooks. An essay, "The Wheel of Life: From Paradigm to Presence," appears in the art catalogue *In the Present Moment: Buddhism, Contemporary Art and Social Practice* by Haema Sivanesan (Victoria, BC: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2022).

Praise for

A DREAM WANTS WAKING

“Deeply in touch with Chinese earth-based knowledge, Lydia Kwa brilliantly propels fox spirits, ghosts and forgotten history into the future. This is fantasy that remembers with a purpose, giving us the chthonic roots we need to inhabit the planet in a better way.”

LARISSA LAI, author of
The Tiger Flu and Salt Fish Girl

“*A Dream Wants Waking* is the satisfying exhale we’ve been long anticipating from this acclaimed and multi-talented author. As in her earlier books, myth, history, fantasy, quest and questions are intricately layered in this latest novel, resulting in a masterpiece of knowledge, dream and imagination. As usual with Lydia Kwa’s work, I was immediately captivated by complex, conflicted characters, shaped with wit and charm, even with the most wicked of villains. This novel is the crown jewel of an already unique and brilliant collection of books that has changed my way of reading. I dare you to let it change yours too.”

JENNY HEIJUN WILLS, author of *Older Sister*.
Not Necessarily Related.: A Memoir

“Lydia Kwa’s *A Dream Wants Waking* is too prescient to distrust, too fantastical to revolt against. The reincarnation of Yinhe, the half-human half-fox spirit, brings us to a future that’s terrifying and that seems already here. Like a mirror of the world, each page shows each of us an uncanny reflection of who we were, and who we will be. Yet the story is also about reclaiming love in a time when all hope is lost. Days after I finished the last page, I’m left haunted and mesmerized. These dreams of Yinhe are a must-read!”

DAN K. WOO, author of *Taobao* and
Letters to Little Comrade

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