

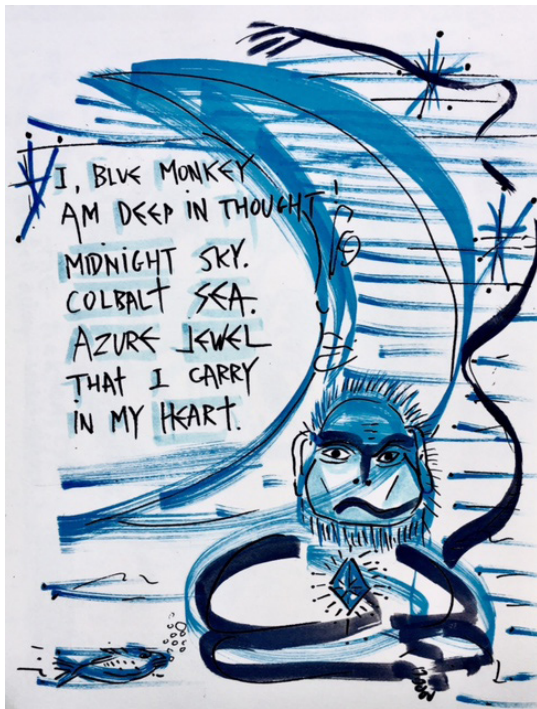
# Azure in Angel City

## a blues sketch, part one

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Blue Monkey was abandoned, orphaned to a homeless life along the Los Angeles River. He, together with three denizens of the river—"Thumbless," "Breathless," and "M & M" (Mirror Man)—question the skewed world in which they find themselves: "*What's azure in Angel City?*" As of this writing, the L.A. River is in the midst of a clean-up, but that's only the surface of this tale.

What appears before you is an excerpt (part one), a "blues sketch" from jottings and fifty+ *Instagram* pen drawings that began at the start of Covid. The journey of Blue Monkey and his compatriots begins in the the City of Angels and ends its course in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, alluding to elements of *Journey to the West*, *Records of Faxian*, *Meghaduta*, and *Ramayana*, among other ancient texts and modern tales.

"Clothed in sacred darkness not thine own, Thine is the azure of the costly stone..."

-*Meghaduta*, Cloud Messenger by Kalidasa, 350 CE

### ***What's azure in Angel City?***

Among the foreplay of lost dialects and stray desires,  
a premature birth is recorded as fluently as time follows tide—

He was born East of Hollywood  
on a river mudflat, sheltered by cat tails and oak,  
between the Sepulveda Dam and the L.A. River  
under barbed-wired electric fences and cement block warehouses

*Sigh Gulp Sigh Humph Sigh Aiiieeeee*  
with tender wings of lung, gasping bronze air bravely.  
The minute he entered the world: 12:00 PM exactly,  
his parents threw a blue tarp  
over his face and body to quash the whimper below:  
Homely as hell, his parents think,  
undeniably a mammal, yet looking more monkey than manly!  
Stuck-out ears, squashed nose, and big lips,  
they prayed the blur would turn breathless blue.

### ***Tarp***

After they left him for dead, almost  
a common miracle occurred, as life arises in the midst of mud:

An overheated cosmic sign—110-degree sun  
congealed the color of blue tarp  
fused cobalt onto a flat face  
shoulders, chest, simian fingers and feet—  
Immaculate indigo.

Solar-baked, his skin colored in radiant blue!  
Despite such a cruel, radioactive state of blueness  
the blue monkey survived day one, day two,  
day three, day four, and months more.

Yet for others, as we know, blue tarps  
barely conceal camps of trespassers and transients  
who pick at the outer scabs of cities—  
not only L.A., Manhattan, Manila, Beijing, Mumbai,  
in any language that we speak, their names are relatives:  
Homeless. Drifter. Exile. Refugee. Migrant..  
Wanderer. *Lau-long*. Paperless.  
Picker. Persona non grata.

### ***Thumbless***

Swoop! A strong hand plucked Monkey into thin air!  
Thumbless (who leaves no trace)  
held Monkey in the palm of his right four-fingers.  
Grinning, five-foot five inches—Khmer,  
but how did he lose his right thumb?

In short (like shortbread), Thumbless worked  
for Wonder White Bread (the Atwater branch),  
downstream just blocks from the river.  
Not making bread, which he didn't eat much,  
Thumbless (given name, Anchaly, for hand)  
formerly was head factory mechanic from Siem Reap  
So he knew a lot about machines long before America

Pausing once to fix the bread-cutting machine,  
He cursed as the blade whirled and sliced off his thumb  
which fell to the factory floor, scampering away.  
Detached from hand and body, it still had memory, like a foot  
with a path of its own.  
Workers called him "Thumb-less,"  
closer to his real name, anyway, until he was laid off.

Anchaly chased his thumb out the door, but it hid in the cottontails,  
and he pleaded with Buddha, to no avail.  
In the meantime, he twirled Blue Monkey like a toy  
around the palm of his hand, pointing with his index finger  
South to a world beyond the river, across the Pacific—

Osaka, Kaohsiung, Hong Kong, Phnom Penh, Colombo—  
ports he'd passed through as a seaman.

Now, each dusk after checking the bakery dumpster  
he'd head down to find Monkey on a mud islet on the river.  
From a backpack Thumbless would take out a loaf  
of day-old bread—soft and porous as a sponge.

### ***River***

Taken to heart and raised up by *longong*  
the working hands and roving relations of the river  
Monkey would strut out and stutter to his own reflection:

Nilā Nalā Nilā Nalā  
Out of negative, Newness!  
Out of blueness, Monkey!

Blue Monkey dared to call this river home  
but for flotsam of factories, jetsam of acrid anthropoids  
that jettisoned his take on a beautiful world.  
Brown stream bubbling beneath his toes  
Elegant egret, thin legs hobbled for a second  
in a frothy swirl of discarded plastic wrappers,  
orange peels, crumbling styrofoam cups,  
glass bottles and half a fishing pole, red rubber ball,  
bicycle hub, stringless pastel face masks.

No one could deny Monkey this truth: The L.A. River was a concrete ditch.  
Once fertile banks and native riverbed, now channeled waste water  
suppressed by concrete, cement block walls, laced with red and blue graffiti,  
an unending chain that carries detritus from Santa Susanna,  
Sepulveda, Los Feliz, downtown L.A., Compton, Lakewood, Wilmington, Long Beach,  
to empty its own existence into the Pacific.

Blue Monkey scratched his arms until his wrists bled.  
His body ached with sorrow, seeking farther places in his mind  
distraught as any Hanuman under a cloud of sewer flies.

### ***Breathless***

Under a fragrant bush of sage  
Blue Monkey daydreamed he was a dapper deva,  
tossing magic stones  
floating across an azure sea as Nilā and Nalā did  
eons before he was born—  
until someone began teasing and tickling his feet.

Wearing a cheap kung-fu jacket,  
caricature Chinese waiter, laughing right in his face.  
Monkey frowned, but the man looked stronger,  
so he just squatted, kept his cool.

The man said: You're Master Monkey of the River, right?

Monkey nodded modestly.

But I'm Master of the Borrow.  
Can I borrow your time?

Monkey said "Why not? I have lots of time and it's still free."

The buff man huffed: I'm from the famous Chinese city of Xian.  
Juicy dumplings, and thousands of ancient soldiers carved in stone.  
As for me, I used to run bike repair shops when I wasn't doing kung-fu.  
I'm here on borrowed time, my tourist visa ran out some time ago.  
But, I never panic. I know how to breathe.  
Walk forward and talk backwards.  
Look at the river! Look at the tree! Look at the fence!

Blue Monkey looked, shrugged.

The man from Xian said: Everything we have is borrowed from this river.

Nothing is really ours. We make use of things.  
Recycle time. Recycle things.  
We're scavengers of everything thrown away.  
If you learn this well you can double, triple,  
Even quadruple your powers!  
Everyday I'll come by and show you how to recycle time.  
Don't waste your precious life sleeping under that silly sage bush.

Blue Monkey said "It's a real deal, sir. Whatever is your honest name?"

"Breathless" the man said. It means:  
Waste less hot air--but breathe down deeper.  
Love things less to live forever.  
Beyond what heaven intended for monkeys like you!

Blue Monkey and the Breathless practiced *prana*—  
Water way. Seagull soar. Willow sway.  
Paws planted firmly on broad nostrils, Monkey would  
filter musky smells before they ever reached his nose.

## ***Rain***

*What's azure in Angel City?*  
Not in a hundred years, but one real day  
when foolish men anger Chinigchinix,  
rain will fall without fail and fell all that stands:  
Tongva shamans, sketching sacred figures  
upon the sand, forecast generations of birth  
and decay, rain and sun.

Thus they built huts of wood, branches and reeds,  
villages nestled within oaken groves named  
Cahuenga, Tujunga, Cucamonga, Topanga

above Angeles river streams  
Keeping their plank boats ready to push off

whenever flash floods called upon them to higher ground.

But after another hundred years, tainted copper clouds  
appeared tonight, December, the time the Tongva had foreseen.  
Violet smog eclipsed the sun, oxidized Angel City,  
fermented the blood of unborn fetuses-by then  
Gaia's cycle of birth and life was aborted,  
green river commas of tadpoles already gone.

Winter sky batters down to deep purple bruise  
lightning bolts splice the bloated air  
Acid rain ravages clay bungalows, overtakes  
mega-mansions, fissures freeways: ancient anger  
recoils at the overturning of ancient loam to acrid earth.

Instantly, Monkey was drenched, as rushed as ramen in a bowl,  
Skidding and skittering into the black river below.  
Thumbless and Breathless at his side, clutch  
an empty shopping cart, cling to  
a Volkswagen hood, clamber up the concrete  
bank, out of breath,  
curse, unpeeling neon bits of plastic,  
tossed transparent condoms,  
fishing nets entangling their limbs-collapsing  
under a lost blue tarp, tossing and turning  
to the drumbeat of rain until dawn.



## *Mirror*

Achoo! I'm hungry now, nowhere to call home! Monkey chimed.



Thumbless pulled out the last loaf of bread from his cargo pant.

Never fear, you're not alone, we're here! Three's a crowd.

Where is home, Monkey cried again, but soon distracted  
a red cruising bike steadily moving towards the trio. Affixed  
onto its wide handlebars, eight small mirrors  
glinting like a starry chandelier in the drizzle.

Save us! cries Monkey.

Breathe slowly, Breathless purses his lips.  
Thumbs up! Thumbless holds up four sturdy fingers.

The biker leaned on the handlebars: triangular face,  
mustache, and ivory teeth below a frayed Dodgers cap.

So it's you, Boss Monkey of the River!

Nah, I'm just a monkey, blue and wet. Thumbless & Breathless here for the ride.

Boss, can't save you from your final fate. But I can help you find your way!

And, who are you? Why the mirrors?  
Can I see my handsome self? asks Monkey.

These are my Mayan mirrors, Monkey Man.  
Rain and smog don't cloud 'em. My extra mirror eyes-  
reflect past, present and future.  
Avoid accidents, bad luck, sheriffs.  
I see 'em before they see me—so far so good.  
Here around the river I'm Mirror Man—M & M!

### ***Dragnet***

Hey man, what's happening over there?  
Jagged flashing movements in his mirrors glint in his eyes.  
Three pale men carry black searchlights.  
Not construction workers.  
Not picnickers, not now, not ever.

Zig-zagging in tandem, up and down the concrete,  
river dragnet snaking behind trees and river grass  
until they find and pull forth a fugitive,  
pinion and cuff the dark, unlucky man.

Sheriffs? ICE? Vigilantes? When the rain stops,  
after saving all the wet ones in their tents  
or the homeless caught outside by floodwaters,  
they want human catch squirming in their hands.  
But they won't get us, no way!



### Way

Let's scam! Pushing his heels on his wheels, M & M leads the way-  
 Ach! Ach! One by one Monkey starts pulling hairs from his chest  
 dashing them with all his might like swords into wet earth.  
 Behind his blue tail, thick green brambles shoot up as tall as a man!  
 That'll buy them time from the dragnet.

Monkey, Breathless, and Thumbless reach the freeway underpass  
 WE RECYCLE LIVES, MAKE LA GREEN AGAIN  
 on the side of a dumpster truck revving its engine  
 Jump on, M & M said, hoisting Monkey in first, then the others.  
 Pulling the canvas tarp tight and taut over their heads.

Thump, jerk, bump, toss and turn, crammed  
 under the wet tarp with plastic bottles, discarded toys  
 lumbering down I-5 South, west on 710, until  
 they whiff the tang of salt, sea, bunker oil.

The truck slowed, a voice somewhere shouts:

You, driver-Recyclables left, combustibles right.  
 Meantime, fill out the new drayage forms. Gotta wait in line.





From under, Thumbless says:

Port of Long Beach, I know that smell, I know it well.  
We're gonna be dumped or find ourselves far away!

Blue Monkey: Once they open the tarp, they'll find us, now what?

My cruiser? Wish I could fit it in my backpack! said Mirror Man.  
My mirrors tell me we need to go with the flow. Not stick out like sore thumb.

Borrow the Tao, the Way of Nature, says Breathless.  
Who the hell is Tao? grunts Thumbless.  
Mind over matter! replies Breathless.  
Even when matter is polluted? quips Monkey.

Breathless goes on:

I will show you how to breathe.  
Shrink your body as small as a water bottle!

But can we return to our real sizes later? Monkey wonders.

Fanning his arms in an arc, Breathless says:

Don't fear, breathing is everything. Back and forth.  
Big to small. Small to big. Young to old, old to young.  
Even male to female, or female to male, if that's your thing.  
Pronto! Close your eyes, and follow me!

Monkey shrugged. Thumbless put his good thumb up.

M & M shook his head in disbelief-what his Tongva grandpa had told him

made sense now-

*Do not fear the future. No matter  
how far you stray from the river, it will bring you back one day.*

In unison, they chant:

*One breath. One body. My mind over any body!*

Fingers and toes start to twitch and tingle, inch by inch they shrink  
even M & M's wheels, now pint-sized, fits in his miniature backpack.

Not a minute too soon, as the tarp flew up, a steel forklift  
lifted and unloaded the entire truck, dumping the recyclables  
into the mouth of a forty-foot container.  
As small as water bottles, the four hold onto each other  
so they wouldn't drown in the tide of trash.

Broiling under hot sun until a giant orange claw they could not see  
Lifts the container up and on board the waiting ship.  
Would they be sent down deep in an airless bay

or stacked above the hatch facing the sea? Breathless wondered.

Clang, the steel door closes. Metal rods lash door to panel,  
turnbuckles bolt them inside from the outside!

It was just one container  
stacked in a pyramid among the rest:  
Evergreen. COSCO. Hyundai, Wanhai, Hanjin. Maersk, CMA...  
tons of all the world's goods, and all the world's trash plowed  
back and forth through tide and tsunami across the North Pacific,  
Sea of Japan, East China Sea, Strait of Malacca.

Homeless before and homeless now, trapped  
on a container ship. Would they end up in an other place?  
Blue Monkey panicked, tears began to stream  
from his eyes. Cosmic destiny or is this all  
some dirty trick, he moaned.

Stop sniveling! Thumbless said.  
Hold tight, I know my way around these ports!  
Look carefully, this old container is gonna be discarded soon.

See light coming through? Broken welds? Rusted  
cracks in the corners? This ain't airtight. We can breathe.  
And squeeze. Find food. Wait  
until the ship is out of the harbor-I'll get out  
back to normal size, and be one of the crew!

Breathless took a deep breath, wiped his brow,  
exhausted, his mind over matter exercises only went so far.

Without lighting his usual bundle of river sage,  
Mirror Man chanted to his ancestors, hoping  
to reach their ears anyway. In the dark  
container of the ship, *Fortuna*,  
Blue Monkey just bid his time:  
he'd for sure see blue skies again.

Azure was the hue of his skin,  
azure the color of his name. And, unbeknownst to him,  
a blue cintamani gem was growing  
deeper in his heart.

(journey to be continued...)

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