Promised Protagonists

Promised Protagonists

DIVERSE LIT ANTHOLOGY | VOLUME 1

Edited by
Nico Martinez Nocito
& Katie Lin

Promised Protagonists
promisedprotagonists.org

No part of this book was created using AI.

Reprinted works:

"Chicken Soup" by Anonymous was originally published in Issue 3 of Promised Protagonists.

"Found Family" by Bruce Buchanan was originally published in Issue 41 of *The Pointed Circle*.

"Hyun-Jae and the Ghost" by Madeline Rosales was originally published in Issue 2 of Promised Protagonists.

"Māsina and the Next Healer" by Mirm Hurula was originally published in Issue 2 of Promised Protagonists.

"On This Outlying Planet" by J. J. Steinfeld originally published in *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential* (Guernica Editions, 2021).

"Squirrel Up!" by Silly Goose was originally published on Instagram (@sillygoose.co) in January 2024.

"The Absurd Boy and His Dog, Abzurd" by J. J. Steinfeld originally published in *Misshapenness* (Ekstasis Editions, 2009).

"The Legend of the Demon Sui" by Vivian Cheng was originally published by ButterMochi Journal, October 2024.

"The Raptor" by Edward Ahern was originally published by New Myths, 2025.

"The Thirteenth Year" by Kathryn Reilly was originally published by Haunted Words Press in Issue Six: Ghoulish Grimoires, 2023.

"Three Months" by Ashton Linden was originally published on TikTok and AllPoets by the author.

"Unfathomable" by J. J. Steinfeld originally published in *Identity Dreams and Memory Sounds* (Ekstasis Editions, 2014).

All are used with permission of the author.

SHORT FICTION

POETRY

ARTWORK

Editor's Note

THIS ANTHOLOGY STARTED AS A DREAM to meet our readers. Even while we were publishing stories I loved in our magazine, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to see actual connections forming between kids and the characters. I wondered if certain sentences "clicked" in their mind or if they shared their favorite parts with their family at dinner—after all, moments like these are what inspired me to start this organization.

I began by using funding to print out our issues, delivering them to any school or library that expressed interest. While Promised Protagonist originally started as a largely remote initiative, we also began hosting in-person workshops this year. I was amazed by how many initially shy kids warmed up once we talked about writing, and I was reminded why being a teacher was my dream job as a kid. "How do you become a writer?" a group of fifth graders asked me. "Do you have to go to college for English?" I told them they could start calling themselves writers right now if they wanted to.

I wanted to create a collection specifically designed to display on library shelves, a variety wide enough that anyone can find something they love in it. I am so grateful to Nico for working months on end to help spread the word, contact authors, and compile every piece into the book it is today. We received more submissions than we could have ever imagined: stories about finding yourself, fantasy told from an ecological standpoint, and poems that are both riddles and dreams. From "Yue and the Fox" to "Of Lions and Hyenas," you will find that the overlap between family and folktale in this anthology spans countless cultures and countries.

I am so excited for you to read, and I hope that you see yourself reflected in one of the many protagonists.

Sincerely,
Katie

Yue and the Fox

By Tina Tang

YUE WATCHED MAMA PACK FOOD into a bag.

"I want you to run," Mama said. "Run as fast as you can. Go to the next village and warn them about the bandits that are coming. Have them tell the next village and the next and the next. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama," Yue said, but her voice was small and hesitant.

Mama kneeled down next to Yue. "I know it's scary. I wouldn't ask you to do this if it wasn't important."

Yue nodded. "I can do it," she said, louder. She won all the races against the other boys and girls in the village.

"That's why I chose you out of everyone in this village," Mama said.

"I've never run faster than bandits before though. And they have horses, don't they? I'm not faster than a horse," Yue said.

"You have a head start. And you can go where horses can't. I believe in you, and I believe that you can do it.

Remember: through the forest, stay on the path, to the next village. But hurry!"

Yue reached forward and hugged Mama. Mama hugged back as tight as she could and then gave Yue the bag.

Yue ran.

She ran and ran until her chest hurt and her legs felt as heavy as big stones.

The trees of the forest were so tall. Their large branches were filled with leaves, blocking out the sun. It was so dark that Yue didn't know if she was going the right way. The path became narrower and narrower.

Yue stopped and looked around, but everything looked the same to her.

She was lost.

Yue wanted to cry. But she knew her mother was counting on her. "Be brave," she told herself in a quiet voice.

The leaves rustled near her.

"Who's there?" Yue called out.

"Please help me," a voice said.

Yue couldn't see anyone around. "Where are you?"

"Over here," said the voice. "In the bushes."

Step by step, Yue walked closer. She saw red fur through the leaves. When she pushed the leaves aside, a fox was lying on its side.

The fox raised her head and looked at Yue. "You are too young to help me," the fox said.

Yue's eyes widened at the fox speaking to her, but she still asked, "What kind of help do you need?"

"I broke my leg," the fox said. "You are too young to be a healer. You cannot fix it."

"Someone in the next village will know how to fix your leg," Yue said. "That's where I'm going. And even though I'm young, I'm strong and fast enough to carry you there. But I'm lost."

The fox said, "I know this land well and where all the villages are. I will tell you how to go to the next village if you take me along."

Yue knelt down and took the food her Mama had given her out of the bag. She lifted the fox in her arms. Her fur felt soft and warm against her skin, but the fox was very heavy. Still, Yue had made a promise, so she put the fox in her bag.

When Yue lifted the bag onto her shoulders, the fox's snout was right next to her ear. She started running again, the fox's soft voice telling her where to go.

Yue's shoulders hurt so much from the extra weight. Her legs hurt too. She didn't know if she would have enough energy to run all the way. She remembered how Mama believed in her. Yue knew she had to do it, so she kept going.

One more step.

One more step.

Finally, she stumbled into the next village. “Help me, please,” she called out, standing in front of the main gate. A man ran over.

“Are you okay?” the man asked.

“Bandits,” Yue said, almost out of breath. “They’re coming to my village. My Mama sent me to tell you all, so you can tell the next village and the next.”

The man nodded and turned to get help.

But Yue said, “Wait! I need a healer for the fox. Her leg is broken. I promised.”

Soon, a woman came over. “I’m a healer.” She lifted the bag with the fox in it. “Follow me,” she said.

Inside the room, the doctor laid the fox on the bed. She rubbed a paste made out of strong-smelling herbs all over the crooked leg. Then the doctor dipped clean white cloth into some liquid and wrapped it around the leg. After the cloth dried and became a sturdy cast, the doctor said, “Hu Li Jing, fox spirit, you’re safe to change now.”

The fox stretched and changed into a woman. The woman had long black hair and wore silk robes that glowed. Her eyes shifted between red and black with the light.

“Thank you,” the fox-woman said. “I could not shift until my leg bone was put into a cast. Otherwise, I would have hurt myself more. I know how hard it was for you to carry me here, but you never gave up. I heard what you said about the bandits. So, in thanks, I give you this.”

Hu Li Jing handed Yue a small stick with a single leaf. "You have done enough running today. Eat this leaf and think of home. Then, lay the stick at the entrance of your village and think of me."

"What will the stick do?" Yue asked.

"It will give you time," the fox-woman said.

Yue took the stick. "Thank you."

The fox-woman smiled. "You're welcome."

The healer smiled and said, "Do as Hu Li Jing says. Go on now. You did your part. Now, it's time for us to do ours."

Yue picked up her bag. She pulled the leaf off the stick and put it in her mouth. It tasted very bitter, and Yue almost spit it back out. But she remembered what Hu Li Jing said and thought of home.

She thought of the wooden village gate.

She thought of her neighbors who waved at her everyday as she ran by.

She thought of the other boys and girls who played with her.

Most of all, she thought of Mama and Baba and the little house they lived in together.

When Yue blinked, she was surprised to find herself standing in front of the familiar village gate. She started to run home, but she stopped. She remembered what Hu Li Jing had said.

Yue placed the small stick in front of the gate. She closed her eyes and thought of the beautiful fox-woman.

Nothing seemed to happen.

So she stepped over the stick and ran into the village. "Mama, I'm home!" she said.

Mama ran outside and hugged her. "Oh, Yue! I'm so glad you're safe. I didn't know if there would be enough time for you to come back. I'm so happy."

"Mama, I was so scared. I got lost, and I didn't know what to do. But I did it."

"I knew you would, Yue. I had faith in you. But no matter what happened or will happen, I'm so proud that you tried even when you were scared. You're my brave girl."

"What will happen now?"

"The village is preparing for when the bandits come. We may not be able to do much, but maybe we will stop them long enough, to give the next village more time to prepare."

Yue nodded. "I'll help you."

◆★◆

WHEN THE BANDITS CAME, all the people of the village stood behind the closed village gate waiting. They heard the horses of the bandits coming closer and closer.

There was a loud crash.

And another crash.

But nothing else happened.

After a while, someone climbed to the top of the village walls and peeked outside. The bandits were gathered in front of the gate. But none of them or their horses could move past the entrance. There seemed to be an invisible wall stretching all around the village.

"It's a miracle," the villagers said.

But Yue knew it was because of Hu Li Jing.

For two days, the bandits tried to enter the village, but they could not.

Then, more people on horses came galloping out of the forest.

Mama smiled at the sight of them. "I know who they are. They are people from other villages, and they have gathered all together to help us. The message made it all the way to them. Thanks to you, they were able to make it here in time."

And when those with ill intent had been finally chased away, the invisible wall shimmered and disappeared. The village was safe.

On This Outlying Planet

By J. J. Steinfeld

Here I am on this outlying planet:
no name yet but nameless things,
especially planets, always irritate,
and naming must be done
like breathing or complaining
about eternal things.

The trip wasn't so bad
not like in sci-fi films.
Should I remove my spacesuit
breathe the air of this outlying planet?
It could be purer or worse
than my previous planet,
but why take a chance?
My spacesuit is state of the art
and I have a lifetime supply
of the best manufactured air
money can buy.

Maybe I won't leave my spacecraft.
Maybe I will sit here
with my protective spacesuit
and look through the portal
at this outlying planet,
no longer outlying
because I am finally here.

Maybe I will name it *Earth*
or *Imagination* or leave it nameless.
I am not sure yet,
being new to space travel
and landing on outlying planets.