



PLAYING NATURE'S YEAR  
A CYCLE OF SEASONAL GAMES

MEGUEY BAKER

PLAYING  
NATURE'S  
YEAR

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Printed by Collective Copies, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA.

NIGHT SKY GAMES

GREENFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, USA.

*This work is dedicated to our little black ladycat*

*Periwinkle "Percy" Baker, May 1, 2002 - Nov 19, 2015.*

*She was a dear companion who loved going outside many times a day all year round. May she enjoy warmth, high places and slow squirrels in the heaviside layer.*

## Be you welcome.

I grew up and currently live in New England, a place where the seasons are ever-present and ever-changing. I also grew up surrounded by stories of wishes, ancient powers, fortune-telling fish, fairies, and things that go bump in the night. In November of 2014, I was taken by the idea of a series of small games to celebrate the seasons and the connection between the stories we tell and the world around us. This game cycle is the result.

When we step outside, we enter into a space that is bigger and older than any human story. In our daily lives, it is easy and often necessary to pass this by, going from house to car to office or school to other enclosed transport between other enclosed spaces. Some of us have a patch of ground, or animals and plants to tend, or a bit of sidewalk that needs shoveling, but not all of us have even that small brush with the natural world in our daily lives. We risk missing the meaning in the movement of birds and bees and animals that share even the most urban landscapes with us. We risk missing the wonders of evergreens against the snow and fiddleheads ringing vernal pools, of green mossy banks and milkweed seeds blowing on the wind. We risk missing savoring the flavors of the year in intentional ways, from maple syrup and wild strawberries to apple pie and winter squash. We risk missing the warning a red sunrise gives of the wet weather that follows, or the ring of frost around the moon, or the pleasant message of a wind from the west.

To closely paraphrase Antoine de Saint Exupéry,

*“Let us build memories in ourselves and in each other, lest we drag out joyless lives, lest we allow treasures to be lost because we have not been given the keys. We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.”*

These games are my attempt to help in handing down the keys, to connect with nature and the wonder of the world. It is my hope that they help with the creation of meaning and memories, and the fulfillment of wishes. Let us explore the year and its turning together. Thank you for coming.

*iv*

*Playing Nature’s Year*

## How to use this book

This book contains eight short seasonal games you can play with anyone. It also contains essays on the animals, plants, food, and stars of each season, with a focus on New England. You can start at the beginning, or choose the nearest season, or your favorite season, or the one that seems most fitting for what you want to play just now.

All of the games require dice. All but one of them need a set of 10 identical six-sided dice per player. An easy way to get sets of 10 matching six-sided dice is to buy the game *Tenzi*. Check your local toy or game store, or order it directly at [www.ilovetenzi.com](http://www.ilovetenzi.com). It is a whole lot of fun in its own right, and while the dice won't generally be the colors I recommend, you can still play with them! The game comes in a 4-player set and a 6-player set. I recommend the 6 player set because the container is much easier to use and store, and because then you will have enough sets for all the games in this book!

Usually in these games, you play as yourself, imagining that you and your friends are racing through the winter woods, or preparing a garden, or walking through a graveyard on Halloween. Sometimes you play as something else, imagining you are a flock of birds or a dog. Sometimes you and your fellow players imagine a character together and tell a story about them as they play hide-and-seek or go on a journey. In one game you just explore your local environment!

When you play, be mindful of the other players. Take turns, build on each other's ideas, make sure everyone has a chance to speak. If you've been talking a lot, let someone else speak up; if you've mostly been listening, add your voice!

After each game, there are five brief essays: my commentary on symbolism in the game, then Jodi's animals of the season, Emily's silent green companions of the season, Vincent's recipe and notes from the kitchen, and Epidiah's stories of the night sky. Use these to expand your observation and celebration of each season. Add your own notes. Teach these games to other people, and make up your own. Play with anyone and everyone, the whole year through.

*v*

*Welcome*

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## Midwinter Hope, Promise, and the Returning Light

By the end of December, life happens in the dark. We get up in the dark, eat breakfast in the dark, even drive off to school and work in the dark. Sunrise is a thing seen on the run, and we don't have time to stop and notice it. The end of the day comes before I arrive home, headlights on already as I pull in the driveway at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. What pulls me through these days is the knowledge that this is as dark as it gets, and light's return is only a few days away. Where we live, the cold often comes first, and the snow often comes after, so we wait and watch for the first few snowfalls to make everything seem bright and fresh and new again after the darkening rush of November. Snow makes even streetlights shine, and the full moon on snow covered fields is a brilliant icy blue unknown to other parts of the year.

Outside, winter birds flock to bird feeders, farm animals stick close to barns, and this is the season to find fox prints and deer tracks in the snow. The air is clear and sharp and dry, and sounds carry farther. The scent of pine, the wisp of wood smoke, maybe the tang of salt on the roads. Inside, the cats seek the highest warmest parts of the house. The blow and pause of the heat kicking on, or the crackle of a wood fire, has replaced the whirl of fans. Beeswax and balsam warm the air, and a singing kettle adds steam to soothe dry lungs. Now for a mug of warm tea with honey.



Winter invites us to rest and reflect, to turn inward on long evenings and consider how we might best spend what energy we have. There is an intentionality in what we do physically in winter. Let there also be intentionality in what we do mentally. This is not easy, not always comfortable. The slow shifting as parts and pieces realign in order to give room to the new can mean deciding what to lay aside for a season or a cycle of seasons, and what to pursue with all our hearts. Time to think long and deep, to look into the center of ourselves and see what spark of promise is glowing there in the depths, waiting to spring forth with the returning sun.

There is a reason why this time of year is so full of holidays—we need light and celebration to remind us that life thrives even in the cold and the frost. Some small part of us is not sure, is not completely secure in the knowledge that warmth and ease will ever return. When even breathing outside is hard, when every excursion takes planning and extra time because of the necessary layers and shoveling, when we add layers to the bed and balance the thermostat between being warm and being frugal, it's not easy to remember a time when one could grab keys and slip on sandals and call "back soon!" through an open window. We need the promise of warmth and light to pull us through the cold and dark, and better still if there is friendship to warm the heart as well. At the moment of solstice, when the dark is deepest, we remember that deep underground seeds are sleeping, and that somehow, somehow, they will grow again.



# THE HOLLY & THE IVY

*a midwinter's game for two to six players*

*The holly and the ivy, when they are both full grown,  
Of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown.  
Oh, the rising of the sun and the running of the deer,  
The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir.*

It is Solstice Morning. In an hour, the great white stag will run through your county, trailing the rising sun in his wake. If you can catch him, you may make a wish.

*The holly bears a blossom as white as lily flower,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ to be our sweet saviour  
Oh, the rising of the sun and the running of the deer,  
The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir.*

You'll need ten six-sided dice for each player. Choose dice of a uniform color and size; red, green, white, and gold dice recommended. To earn your right to make a wish, you must roll and reroll your chosen dice until all of them show the same number. After your first throw, you must decide which sort of wish you will make. This is your own heart's wish—there are no characters here, only players, so choose wisely. The number on the die determines the category, thus:

- 1:** A wish concerning **love**
- 2:** A wish concerning **family and friends**
- 3:** A wish concerning **health**
- 4:** A wish concerning **wealth**
- 5:** A wish concerning **this very day, that is already half within your grasp**
- 6:** A wish concerning **the wider world**

So, if in your first roll four of the ten dice show a 3, you can choose to follow the guidance of fate and pursue all 3s and a wish concerning health. If your heart's wish instead concerns the world, you can choose to pursue all 6s even if only one of your first roll shows a 6. All players roll this initial throw at the same time, but take a moment to decide if you will follow fate or forge your own destiny, and let stand the dice showing the number of your choice.

*The holly bears a berry as red as any blood,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ to do poor sinners good.  
Oh, the rising of the sun and the running of the deer,  
The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir*

Following the first roll, each player rolls in turn, pursuing the white stag and their heart's wish. Begin with the person who will be rerolling the most dice and then proceed around the circle.

Take up as many of your dice as you choose and roll them again. Before you throw them you must add a detail to the story of the running of the deer before the rising sun. How many dice are you about to reroll?

**If you are rerolling 6 or more dice,** on your turn you must add a sentence describing the environment—the bite of frost in the air, the clink of icicles, the scent of pine, the plum-colored shadows blooming on the snow.

**If you are rerolling 3, 4, or 5 dice,** on your turn you must add a detail about the stag—the reach of his great antlers, his steaming breath, his sharp hooves breaking through the crust—or about the hunters individually or collectively—your arms tense on the bow, the heft of the spears, the way your empty fingers quiver in the cold anticipating the feel of the stag's warm side, the pounding hearts, the hope in your eyes, your inner thoughts, the way your cape catches on the brush, the sharp crack of a neighbor's foot on a snow-covered branch.

**If you are rerolling 1 or 2 dice,** you must describe your own attempts to approach or to shoot the stag—the rushing arrow, the side-step of the stag, your held breath, the shine of the stag's eyes.

*The holly bears a prickle as sharp as any thorn,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ on Christmas Day in the morn.  
Oh, the rising of the sun and the running of the deer,  
The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir*

Take turns around the circle rolling and adding to the story. Incorporate and build on each other's words. When the time comes, some players may be shooting at the stag as others try to reach it empty-handed. If you are shooting, you are the holly, sharp and piercing—you must not hit your fellow hunters. If you are approaching empty-handed, you are the ivy, widespread and encircling—you must not block your fellow hunters' shot.

*The holly bears a bark as bitter as any gall,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ for to redeem us all.  
Oh, the rising of the sun and the running of the deer,  
The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir.*

If you are the first player to reach all ten dice showing the same number, you have caught the white stag on Solstice Morning. You win the right to make a wish according to the fates you have followed or the destiny you have chosen. Describe your final moments with the stag and make your wish. Keep your wish secret in the manner of all wishes, unless you've made a wish for this very day. Then, tell it and seize on it!

Players who have not won the right to wish may play again with different players.

*The End*

## Commentary: The Holly and the Ivy

The song here is a traditional Christmas carol describing parts of the holly plant as analogies for the birth and promise of the Christ Child. In a grand tradition of newer ideas building on older ones, the holly was a pagan symbol of green and life and vitality even in the deepest winter, and so was incorporated into the Christmas celebrations. I particularly like this song because it is one of few that blends both old and new; Mary and the new baby of the new faith as well as the rising sun and the running deer of the old.

The primary symbols in this game are the stag and the returning sun. The winter solstice is the point when, in my part of the world, the sun is farthest away and we feel most cold and dark. All life on earth depends on the sun, and the turning of the earth around the sun gives us the seasons that magnify our reliance on both our star and our care and resourcefulness. Our deep roots go back to a time when people worshipped the sun as a living god, and recognized the power of ritual in noting the passage of the sun from near to far to near again, even if they did not yet have the understanding of the science behind it.

The stag is a reference to a second major ancestral deity, the god of the hunt, of wild things, of food through the winter and therefore of all animals as we follow the year around. It was by this god's will that animals were caught or lost, and he was unpredictable, worthy of respect if not fear, and wild in all ways. The parallels to what eventually becomes the unicorn are easy to draw, as the wild places become more and more closed off to everyday life and we become committed to taming nature rather than living in accord with the natural cycles of warm and cold, light and dark.

One of the things that pulls us through the long winters is community, so the third aspect of the game is the sense of being together in the darkness. We tell stories together more when there is less to do outside, and when it is harder to be outside, having companions to encourage us can help. Sometimes this game can lead to strange places! I have heard of a game where the stag took on the

face of a man; this does not surprise me, because when we set off into the woods in winter on a sacred quest, strange things might happen!

Last, a note about the difference between approaching the stag armed or empty-handed. Both are viable options to the same ends, but some people will be more drawn to one or the other. Does the stag favor one or the other? I'm not sure! It's a question to ponder over in the wee hours before sunrise, and both options have merit. How do I approach life and its challenges? Am I the arrow or the vine? Do I want to change my approach in the coming year? The ways we examine and answer questions such as these may have as great an impact on being granted our heart's wish as catching a white stag, and there's no time like now to begin.

## Animals of Midwinter

*Jodi Levine*

The dark of the year. The quiet time, when everyone is asleep and dreaming of spring. That's what most people think, and they might be right if they're only thinking of reptiles, amphibians, little brown bats and a few others who truly hibernate the winter away. While the turtles, frogs and toads are buried deep in the mud, some so frozen that except for Mother Nature's own antifreeze in their cells they are truly frozen solid, and the garter snakes sleep in large groups beneath the rocks, waiting to emerge en masse in the spring and surprise any passers-by, true hibernation, the state where an animal's respiration and heartbeat slow down to the point that they can't be aroused quickly, is a rare thing for mammals in New England. In fact our only true hibernators are bats, chipmunks and groundhogs. Others, such as bears and skunks, will sleep away the coldest days but may rouse on a warmer day to scuffle around, foraging for what food they may find.

Still others, squirrels and mice who have been industriously storing away seeds, nuts and berries, and deer and moose, busy all year long, remain active and engaged with their darkening world. Some animals seem to revel in the cold, especially the otters, who like nothing better to take running slides across the snow-covered ground. Look for their long belly tracks in fields near riverbanks. The deer, finished with their rutting, have now begun to shed their antlers. How strange it must be to carry such a heavy load for much of the year, only to cast it to the ground and wait for it to grow once again!

Of course, now is a wondrous time to be a bird. While some species are long gone, heading off to warmer climes like tourists craving sunshine (we won't be seeing our hummingbirds for many months—they need abundant flowers to keep their little wings beating!) others stay year round and still others, including many geese, consider this to be the southernmost stop on their annual journey. Some birds crowd around the flowing water of riverbanks, camping out by the hundreds sometimes on ice floes. Others adorn our bushes and trees, feasting

on berries, exposed now that the leaves are gone. Many are grateful for the seeds and suet that humans leave as offerings for them, eager to catch glimpses of their bright feathers. Of course, those treats are a feast for the squirrels, too, the larger greys who come in gregarious groups and amuse us with their acrobatics and the smaller, scolding reds, never more than one at a time because they hate to share!

Our insects seem mostly gone now. Some have mated, laid eggs to ensure there will be future generations, then died after living out their short lives. A select few have migrated with the birds, the Monarch butterflies seeking out wintering grounds in Mexico and elsewhere. Still others are hunkered down. Among our bees, only the queen usually survives the winter, waiting to lay a whole new family for herself when the sun returns, but ants and ladybugs huddle together in masses waiting for the warmth to bring them out again. If you look closely, though, there are others that remain awake. Step in the snow on a warm day, wait a few hours and look in your footprint. Are those poppy seeds? But no, they're jumping! These are tiny Colembola, or snow fleas, defiant against the cold. And of course some find their way into our homes to stay warm and awake, too. Those shield bugs that like to find water in your bathroom or near your windows and smell pungent when disturbed are harmless, just another creature trying to stay alive through the dark of the year.



## Our Silent Companions: Midwinter

*Emily Care Boss*

Here in the northeast US where I live, when the year begins we often forget the plants around us. Silent and sleeping, they are weathering the storms we shut our doors against. But we venture out to bring in those who keep wearing brilliant garb: pine, spruce, holly.

If you go into the woods to seek greens for the season you may see the white stag. Look in the deepest thickets of white pine or eastern hemlock. The sheltering boughs give deer safe harbor. Perhaps find that unique beast hiding there.

This time of year the sawyers love the woods. The footing is firm. The snow may be deep, protecting the soil, fragile swamps and tender herbs frozen beneath. Pine timber is especially prized for cutting in the winter—the cold holds off pine blue stain, a bane of sawmills during warmer months. The cold holds things still and keeps them safe.

Step out into the cold, see what secrets the winter reveals. In winter, oak, birch, beech, ash all shed their cloaks of green, making it hard for us to tell them apart. But this is an invitation to come closer.

## Midwinter in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

Yule doesn't begin my year in the kitchen, it ends it. Yule is the party at the end of the old year, the beginning of winter, with a whole season of lifelessness, want, before the birth of a new spring.

Whatever we've put up during the year before, we bring it out to share with our loved ones. If we've put pre-made apple pie filling in the freezer, we have apple pie. If we've preserved pears in woodruff wine or cardamom syrup, if we've made our blackcap raspberries into jam, if we've done pick-your-own blueberries and made lemon-blueberry conserve, out they come. There's still fresh-pressed cider in the markets and I don't need to tell you about squash or pumpkin pie.

On the morning after the solstice, we pour a little cider onto the roots of the apple tree, the pear tree, and into the blackcap bramble, to thank them for the year past and bless them for the year to come. We cheer the return of the sun with the best of what it's given us, on pure hope that after the months of barren cold to come, the sun will return the cheer.

### Cranberry-orange Relish

Cranberries  
Sugar  
An orange

Boil the cranberries with a little water and plenty of sugar, stirring occasionally.

Grate the orange zest and add it; squeeze the orange juice and add it too.

Cook until the berries burst.

Add more sugar to taste.

You can add chopped apples too.

## The Night Sky at Midwinter *Epidiah Ravachol*

It is a dizzying prospect to glance skyward at night, when the shadow of the Earth turns away the possessive glare of our own Sun, allowing us to peer out upon distant worlds. We are standing on the edge of a massive whirling top spinning at an equatorial speed of about 1,000 miles an hour and hurtling around the Sun at 66,000 miles per hour. From this breakneck vantage, most of the pinpoints of light we see across the sky are more massive yet tops pirouetting with us and hundreds of billions of other stars that make up the Milky Way. This galaxy is, in turn, swirling, flinging our little solar system around a galactic core at about 483,000 miles an hour. And if we stand on a lonely, country road on a clear night, our naked eyes can make out impossibly distant fuzzy patches of light that are themselves more galaxies, careening with ours on radial paths in all directions from *the* point of origin.

Complex is too shallow of a word to adequately describe the breathtaking clockwork of the cosmos.

Our ancestors began describing this ponderous dance by putting a pin on their home, holding the Earth still and recording the courses of all other visible bodies in the universe from this frozen perspective. When all is in motion, this geocentric view is no less true than any other. So we will do the same, placing our pin atop a deserted mountain in the Northeastern part of North America on a series of clear nights in the earliest part of the 21st century; so that we may catch our breath and watch the skies spin around us.

From here, objects rise daily in the East and arc steadily toward the West. But not all objects move in fixed relation to one another. The Sun shifts against the backdrop of the other stars, rising in a slightly different place each day of the year, annually tracing the same gradual path across the sky known as the ecliptic. Crawling along the ecliptic, the Sun blots out all other stars that rise with it in the infernal brilliance we call day. We set our clocks to the Sun, but we set our calendars to what stars we can see at night.

The patterns these cycles make were recognized by cultures all over the globe, and stories arose to explain their appearances during certain seasons. Here are a few of my favorites and the extraordinary phenomena that can be witnessed by the naked eye from our quiet hill if the sky is clear, at the right time of night, during the correct time of year.



## Early Spring Birdsong of the Heart

There is something about that time in late January when for a brief moment you can feel spring on the horizon. My heart lifts then, even though I know it's still weeks and weeks away. It's such a fleeting thing, not like a month from now when the melting icicles make a tiny welcome cadence to the day. This is a hint of warmth, the merest shift of light, and then you realize: the days are getting longer. You've known it on some intellectual level for a month or more, but this, right around the last day of January or the first few days of February, this is for real. There will still be a few more snowstorms, and it's as cold as ever, perhaps colder, but the light has changed.

Chickadees and cardinals, sparrows and little grey juncos make hatch marks on the snow as they peck at seeds. The willows begin to swell, and suddenly they go yellow-gold. I always worry they are coming too soon; in my human sphere of cars and houses, I do not know so intimately that the days have lengthened, but the trees do, and they are right on time. I watch and wait for the first flock of geese heading north, willfully ignoring that different types migrate at different times, and to the geese who wintered over in the comparatively balmy fields near me, it's time to fly back to northern Canada. The male goldfinches start to look more and more yellow, and then one day, the liquid song of the red-winged blackbird rolls across the yard and I feel like singing too. My heart lifts because we made it. We came through the winter's dark, even if we still have a month of cold and snow ahead.

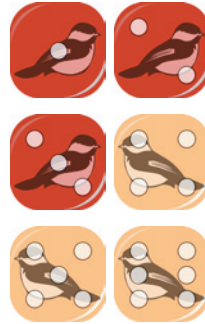
There's a saying about keeping a song in your heart, but I think we actually keep several there. There are songs that play in our own internal jukebox, over and over, in every season. Sometimes the seasons are the ones outside, and we sing "White Christmas" or "Summertime" or "Rain, rain, go away". Other times the songs inside are about our own seasons, where we are in our lives and our inner climate. If I find I'm singing the same lyric over and over for days, I stop and listen to what the song is saying. Sometimes of course it's an earworm I picked up at the grocery store, sometimes I just really like the new Pentatonix single, but sometimes it's more. "Hard times, hard times, come again no more" laments my winter-weary heart. "Ain't no grave gonna hold my body down," says my conviction to push up through the last dark days and embrace the spring. "Keep on the sunny side," says my internal songbird. Listening to the birds can be like listening to yourself. You need to be still and quiet, and give things a few minutes to settle down, then the birds, both real and imaginary, can share their song.



# IN THE COMPANY OF BIRDS

*a short game about lasting love, for two players*

You'll need ten six-sided dice for each player. Choose dice of a uniform color and size; a different color for each of you. Brown and cream and white recommended.



Through the gray and white and brown of late winter, something is stirring. The hearts of all are hopeful for the coming spring, so near on certain days you can feel its kiss on your cheek so long buffeted by winter's chill winds. And then, fickle, it hides again and icy blasts make winter seem endless and bleak. The season tests even the most steadfast of lovers.

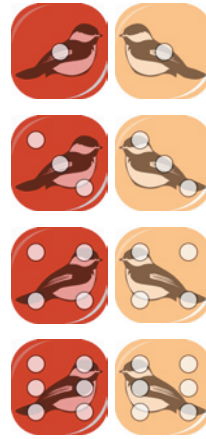
*Up and down on the branches bare  
 Bob little black-heads, just a pair;  
 Pecking their breakfast daintily,  
 Wipe their bills with "Chick-a-dee dee, Chickadee."*

You are a flock of birds, looking for mates. You benefit from finding a mate, and from there being many mated pairs of birds in your flock.

*They are lovers, I think, betrothed in May,  
 Back from their wedding trip to-day;  
 They are just as social as birds can be,  
 But all I gather is, "Chick-a-dee dee, Chickadee."*

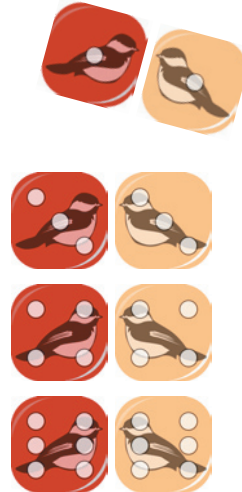
Both of you roll at the same time. On the first roll, match up any pairs between your ten dice and your partner's ten dice. A pair of matching dice is a pair of birds. Each pair must contain one die from each partner. Place the pairs in a row on the table, as though along a branch.

*Down one goes to the frosty ground,  
With a little silvery, wooing sound;  
"Come back," its mate calls from the tree,  
And back she flies with a "Chick-a-dee dee,  
Chickadee."*



Once you've paired up all the birds from the first roll that have mates, both of you reroll all of your remaining dice. Each time you reroll, a pair of birds flies away from one end of the row.

*Haste, little darlings, haste and go!  
The clouds are heavy with coming snow;  
They look at each other, and then at me;  
But they only answer, "Chick-a-dee dee,  
Chickadee."*

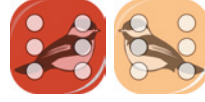




Each time you reroll, any new pairs settle together on the other end of the row. The number showing on the dice can repeat.



*Swiftly the snow is falling down,  
Wrapping the branches bare and brown;  
But, still they flutter from tree to tree,  
With happy, loving "Chick-a-dee dee,  
Chickadee."*



If you and your partner each hold one last die, and all the other pairs of birds have flown, this is your last roll—if they do not match, your score is zero and your birds go without mates. When you and your partner have matched up the last pair of birds or rolled your last roll, count how many pairs remain and read out your fortune below.



*I thought at last, as they flew away,  
Ah! God cares e'en for the birds to-day;  
And why should mortals anxious be?  
There's shelter somewhere for you and me,  
As for chickadee.*

10. The gods themselves smile on your love, sending sunshine, sweet showers, and a cozy nest!
9. Peaceful days and pleasant nights await for hearts in accord.
8. Sweet berry brambles shelter you from all harm.
7. A well-constructed nest, with only the occasional moment of discord.
6. A protected corner gives you a chance—be mindful.
5. With dedicated work, this may take hold and thrive—constant care is needed.
4. Delightful in the moment, but with little future.
3. Fickle winds blow warm one day and chill the next—unsteady and unlucky times.
2. Frost threatens and there is little chance for a safe outcome.
1. The ground is still too cold for any good thing to grow.
0. All have flown and only shadows and empty shells remain.

*The End*

## Commentary: In the Company of Birds

Birds building nests is a sure sign of early spring, and before they do that, they find their mates. This game has only a little symbolism to unpack. Birds nesting are about love and family, homebuilding and fertility. The more pairs of birds, the more nests, the better the chance for healthy baby birds that grow to adulthood as the year unfolds. If the autumn is the full harvest and the spring is the fertile beginning, now is the time of preparing the ground. In the wheel of the year, the beginning of February is the time for planning and for buying seeds, for making choices that will shape the year's work.

Birds communicate a lot in their version of this process. They call to one another, they sing to attract mates and to declare their territory. Watching birds is such a simple thing, and something you can do anywhere. Some birds have dramatic sexual dimorphism, which means males and females look very different, as with cardinals and goldfinches. Others have less, like sparrows and woodpeckers, and some are nearly impossible to tell apart, like blue jays and chickadees. The trick to identifying a mated pair is to watch how they act together. Do they watch out for each other, arrive and depart together or in a closely staggered way? Do they protect each other from other birds, especially from bigger birds? They are constantly communicating, in hops and flights, in chirps and calls. They have to agree on a suitable nesting spot, not too far from food but not too close to predators, they have to build the nest, then they have to incubate the eggs, then raise the young. It's a highly coordinated life. Bird pairs, at least most of the songbirds that I can watch from my window, have a lot of work to do to get to their lives to interconnect in harmonious and productive ways. Rather like people, actually!

## Animals of the Early Spring

*Jodi Levine*

February. Deep winter. The world has been dark for months now and the ground is often covered with a deep blanket of snow. The winter is long and it will be many weeks before the salamanders stir, the toads crawl out of the mud to call for mates or the mosquitoes, mayflies and dragonflies awaken. The bats are still deep in hibernation along with the groundhogs and chipmunks. The skunks haven't so much as rolled over in weeks. The days are getting longer, though. Slowly and steadily the light returns, but is anyone awake to notice? Surprisingly, yes! Much has been happening while the world appears to sleep.

The black bears are dreaming of honey and berries in their dens, still except for the rare January thaw when they awaken and stretch their stiff limbs. All winter they have been growing life within them, though, and over the next few weeks they'll be giving birth. The new cubs slip into the world, hardly disturbing their mothers as they emerge, latch on and drink sweet milk made from all the extra food she ate back in the fall. They'll sleep and suckle, sleep and suckle for weeks before they learn that there is a wider world out there beyond the den, a world of sunlight, greenery and life. Now, though, is the time to sleep, eat and grow.

The birds know that change is on its way and they're not shy about announcing it. Was that a distinct "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" we heard coming from the brush? A mating call is a sure sign of the burgeoning life to come. The little chickadee isn't the only one—a stray golden feather here and there peeks through the drab, buff winter plumage of the male goldfinch, his camouflage ready to be cast off in favor of bright spring garb announcing, "Here I am! Aren't I magnificent?"

The birds aren't the only ones feeling the call to breed. The beavers are mating now. What better way to spend their time while holed up in their watery lodges. The deer and moose, who did their mating back in the fall, are getting round, their bellies swelling with their young, but it will be a while before the fawns will emerge. They're waiting for a world that's not covered in ice and snow.

Food is getting scarcer for the little ones, the mice, voles, squirrels and other small creatures scurrying and scavenging in the woods or, if they're lucky, in our barns or houses, trying to make their hidden supplies last. Some of them, too, may have a winter litter, more mouths to feed, so they all eagerly await the return of the sun and the warmth it brings.

## Our Silent Companions: Early Spring

*Emily Care Boss*

Look at trees in winter. What do you see? Their color, their form. Trees are not brown. They are silver, grey, black. Stark white shot with jet. What shape do their branches take? Oak expands, jostling its neighbors. Cherry and poplar stand tall above smaller brush, or reach their branches high in forest canopy, fighting for a closing window to the sun.

Ash, thick fingered, with branches in pairs, two-by-two opposite one another, dangle their “keys”, oar-shaped seeds. Maple with flaky, platy bark. Whether the thick, wide plates of sugar maple, or the fantastic variety of red maple: small flakes, to long thin strips, to a smooth, clear grey—beech-like except for the tell-tale pattern cracking that looks like gills on a fish.

Late winter takes us to maple syrup season, when telling sugar maples from red is critical. Sugar maple, aptly named, gives 1 gallon of syrup for 40 gallons of sap. For the same, red maple takes 60 gallons. To tell them apart in winter, look at their twig ends: sugar maple has brown buds, sharply cone shaped (think “sugar cones”). Red maples buds are a dark, lustrous red. When you see the red maple’s branches flush red, the sugaring season is over. Spring blushes over the hills.

## Early Spring in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

February is the dead of the year. The produce section at the supermarket baffles our efforts to eat local. We eat California carrots, California broccoli, green beans from I-don't-know-where.

I take comfort from the fact that for 12,000-some years, people have been standing on basically this same spot, staring out their front doors at basically these same bare trees, wondering what on earth to feed their families for dinner tonight.

One year I decided to find out if pine needle tea is delicious. It isn't.

### Sweet Potato Stew

Sweet potatoes, cubed

Onion, chopped

Greens, stemmed and chopped (kale, collards, spinach, etc.)

Cilantro leaves and stems, chopped, separated

Hot pepper flakes

Oil

Salt

Cook onions and cilantro stems in oil until onion is transparent and beginning to brown.

Add the hot pepper flakes and sweet potato, and toss to coat with oil.

Add water just to cover. Add salt. Bring to the boil; reduce heat to simmer until the sweet potato cubes are cooked through.

Add greens by the double handful, stirring to cook down each addition. This stew can absorb a staggering number of greens. Pile them in.

Finish with cilantro leaves.

Serve over rice, grits, polenta, cornbread, or farina.

## The Night Sky in Early Spring *Epidiah Ravachol*

When you stand as far from the equator as we are now, stars close enough to the celestial pole remain visible all year round. They never set below the horizon and the only change is their orientation and position in the sky. They appear, throughout the night and throughout the year, to be rotating around a fixed point. These are known as circumpolar stars. Their steadfastness make them the most familiar of allies to navigators and all else who look up into the night. From the northern hemisphere, this fixed point is near enough to Polaris, or the North Star, to place it at the center of the circumpolar stars. It is at the very tip of the tail of the constellation Ursa Minor or the end of the handle of the asterism the Little Dipper.

The easiest way to find Polaris, however, is to look for the larger and brighter Big Dipper first. The bowl of the Big Dipper always opens to the bowl of the Little Dipper. The Big Dipper is part of Ursa Major and part of my favorite tale told by the stars, one that comes from the Micmac and the Iroquois who lived roughly where we have placed our pin. Here is the tale as it has been told to me.

We start the story in the spring, when the bear stretches out towards the Earth, climbing out of its den. High in the sky, the seven stars that make up the handle of the Big Dipper are each a different bird, hunting the bear for food. The closest is the robin, followed by the chickadee and then the moose bird. We know their intentions because the chickadee has thought to bring a pot to cook the bear in. If you look close enough at the chickadee, you can see the pot.

This is because the “star” we see as the chickadee and its pot is actually two star systems orbiting each other that we can tell apart with the naked eye: Mizar and Alcor. And in fact Alcor is a binary star system and Mizar is a quadruple star system. In total, chickadee and the pot are six tightly packed stars running around each other.

As summer comes, the bear is loping about on all fours, leading our birds on a merry chase. Eventually, this chase wears some of the birds

out. Those that trail the furthest out on the handle of the Big Dipper are not circumpolar like the robin, the chickadee, and the moose bird. So they abandon the chase and one-by-one dive below the horizon.

In the autumn, the bear rears up on its hind legs and the robin sees his chance. He shoots an arrow into the bear, mortally wounding it. The arterial spray from arcs across the sky and stains the robin's breast red. The robin, trying to shake dry, in turn showers the forests below in the bear's blood, staining the leaves red and brown.

As winter approaches, the chickadee cooks the bear and the scent draws those birds who gave up back to the pot where they all feast. Through the chill winter nights the birds leave the bear's skeleton lying on its back, slowly turning over until spring comes and another bear stretches out towards the Earth, climbing out of its den.

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## Spring Equinox On the Thawing of the Ground

Every year in early March, we tire of winter in New England. The snow that was so welcome and wonderful in December is old and lumpy and flecked with dark specks of sand and grit. We are done with the cold, done with the ice, and for God's sakes done with being cooped up indoors. We wait eagerly for any sign of the coming spring; each birdsong is a treasure, each added moment of daylight is a gift. If we are lucky, some little corner of our world sits facing the full southern sun, preferably against a light stone or cement wall, and the snow melts there first, letting the blessed green shoots of daffodils and crocus and tulip emerge like a balm for all our white-weary eyes.

Some of us are not so lucky. Some of us get mud instead. My middle son, 14 at the time, recently called this the ugly season, when it's too muddy and gritty and ragged to be a winter wonderland, but not at all green and fresh and springtimey, like it will be in six weeks. There's not a lot to argue with there; we call it mud season for a reason, and it's not very picturesque.

It's a time of work, of planning, of looking ahead. You have to see beneath the shabby snow and know that things are stirring under there. You have to be keen-eyed, and catch the shift in the goldfinches' feathers as they begin to show the color they are named after. You have to notice when the pair of cardinals that's been at your feeders all winter start showing up one at a time, because there's eggs in a nest somewhere. You have to mark the moment when the

sun feels warm on your face and the wind no longer bites, when the air seems softer in the morning, even if you can still see your breath. You have to point out the grey buckets that sprout on sugar maples, heralding sweetness to come.

All of these are work. Plants grow, eggs hatch, sap rises, and mud thaws enough for garden work. It's time to start seeds for vegetables, tucking tiny flecks of hope and promise into dark soil in cardboard egg-cartons set in a sunny window. As soon as the snow is low enough, pruning and planning begin. You must get in there before the leaves are on, before the fruit sets, because then the old canes and dead branches will be so much harder to find and bring away clean. Every year, I wrestle with the black raspberry bush—how far back can I cut it? The answer is usually not far enough, because it's hard to think about the weight of leaves and fruit when there are none and I still need a hat and boots to work.

All this work is metaphor made practical. In order for new things to grow and come forward, the old must be cut away, and we must often go through an awkward ungraceful stage. We get into ruts and habits over the winter of the soul, and it takes something as mighty as the sun's great warmth to melt those ruts into nice squishy flexible mud again. We get to rearrange ourselves as we rearrange the land in our care, cut out the fruitless canes, fill in the potholes, mind the puddles while they drain. It's good work, but not as pretty as a neatly-shoveled walkway in fresh snow or as obviously rewarding as a bucket full of berries in midsummer. It's tenacious, determined, forward-thinking, occasionally tedious work because we want something more than a pile of weeds, real or metaphorical.

So mud season is the time for new beginnings at the very beginning, before we can even tell it's there. Animals that will birth in the spring are carrying now, and plants that will feed us all are busy with the work of growing through the soil, growing green with melting snow, ready to burst forth. In the wheel of the year, it's a time of starting and optimism, thinking ahead and making good plans. The ground becomes fertile, on all levels. Whatever we set out to do now, with our strength and willingness to work the ground, may come to fruition in the seasons to come. Let us begin.



# Bless The Seeds

*a short game about perseverance, inner strength, and gardening*

For two to four players. You'll need ten six-sided dice for each player. Choose dice of a uniform color and size; a different color for each of you. Brown, green, amber, and tan recommended.

*Inch by inch, row by row  
I'm gonna make this garden grow  
All it takes is a rake and a hoe  
And a piece of fertile ground*

The equinox is upon us. The days grow warm, even as the nights stay cool. Winter is almost past, and we can sense the coming spring everywhere. The Lady of Spring is peeking behind every bud, running her fingers over every downy head. Now is the time of growing.

Each player rolls ten dice. Guided by your dice showing, choose one number and the corresponding intention for the coming season—this does not have to be the most plentiful number, but must be showing in the first roll:

1. In this season, I will begin to learn a new skill, which is...
2. In this season, I will nurture a friendship I have let languish through the winter, by...
3. In this season, I will explore a place new to me, and mark it by...
4. In this season, I will face a task I have been putting off, which is...
5. In this season, I will change a habit I have fallen into, by...
6. In this season, I will embrace something worthwhile about myself that I have dismissed or denigrated, which is...

*Inch by inch, row by row  
Someone bless these seeds I sow  
Someone warm them from below  
Till the rain comes tumblin' down*

Declare aloud your intention, completing the sentence. There may be duplicate numbers among the players, as each will complete the sentence differently. Stack the dice of your chosen number up in a single vertical column.

*Pullin' weeds and pickin' stones  
We are made of dreams and bones  
I feel the need to grow my own  
'Cause the time is close at hand*

For each die in your initial stack, describe a feature of your land where your garden will be—vistas, the lay of the land, clearings, water, outcroppings of rock, trees, etc.—in any real or imagined place. Go around the circle now and take your turn describing your land. The person whose initial stack is shortest goes first on the next round. In case of a tie, the player with the least gardening experience goes first.

*Grain for grain, sun and rain  
I'll find my way in nature's chain  
I tune my body and my brain  
To the music from the land*

On each round, roll your remaining dice and add any dice of your number to your stack. For each die you add, say one thing you do to improve on your land and tend your garden—clearing brush, digging, pruning, planting, weeding, etc. If you are not able to add any dice to your stack, instead describe the actions of nature on your land—rain, sun, wind, animals and plants.

*So plant your rows straight and long  
Temper them with prayer and song  
Mother Earth can keep you strong  
If you give her love and care*

Once your stack stands five dice tall, you may include the actions or evidence of the Lady as she investigates the land—rainbows, dewdrops, swelling buds, a long shining strand of hair caught in a branch, a bare footprint in the mud, laughter, etc. On placing your 5<sup>th</sup> die, restate your intention for the coming season.

*Old crow watchin' hungrily  
From his perch in yonder tree  
In my garden I'm as free  
As that feathered thief up there*

If your stack of dice falls, a late winter storm strikes your garden and you must begin again. Roll again right now and start your new stack, describing one particular thing in your garden that suffers from this setback. Restate your intention for the coming season.

*Inch by inch, row by row  
I'm gonna make this garden grow  
All it takes is a rake and a hoe  
And a piece of fertile ground*

When you place your 10<sup>th</sup>, final die atop your stack, describe the signs of the Lady's blessing as they show in your garden and restate your intention. The Lady of Spring visits the garden of the player with the first complete stack, bestowing her blessings on your intention for the new season. You win.

*Inch by inch, row by row  
Someone bless these seeds I sow  
Someone warm them from below  
Till the rain comes tumblin' down.*

If you win, do some small kind thing for the other players in thanks for the Lady's blessing on your intention.

*The End*

## Commentary: Bless the Seeds

The greatest symbolism here is the Lady of Spring. Our more earth-centered forebears saw this time of year as presided over by the deeply feminine aspect of the world, full of pregnant animals, seeds beginning to burst forth from the ground, small wild animals emerging from the winter's dens and burrows, and the possibility of new life everywhere. Setting a seed to start in a sunny window in February is a different experience than digging into the still-cool soil and placing the bulb beneath the frostline. We need more faith to plant in the open earth, but it is where all things grow.

The song is an old favorite, but the newest piece in the collection, written in 1975. It is a song of work. Gardening is work, whether it's just for a few pretty flowers or the means by which you keep your family fed. On the other hand, the importance of recognizing that everything that lives must eat, which sometimes means that some seeds get lost to mice or rabbits or crows, keeps us humble. What we build up may all come crashing down, and we have only so much control over how we position ourselves within the work. Then there's the bit about getting up again and dusting yourself off once it's all gone south. Pick up the pieces, salvage the seeds, replant, repaint, rebuild. In New England, that tenacity is often called Yankee stubbornness, but I think it's a quality that extends far from here.

Finally, a note on intentions. Intentions are real magic in the world. What you say out loud, in front of other people, is more likely to come to pass. It is why we have witnesses at important junctures in our lives, our joinings and births and new endeavors, our leave-takings and deaths and completions. If you set an intention to grow tomatoes, or get a degree, or have a child, or write a book, it focuses your attention and actions in a way that just saying "Someday I'd like to do XYZ" leaves groundless and without direction. This week. In this season. By the end of the year. These give purpose and strength to your commitment. Be as clear as possible, as complete as possible, framed in the present and the positive, and leave room for even better outcomes, because the universe and your own internal subtle strengths and motivations are listening.

## Animals of the Spring Equinox

*Jodi Levine*

At long last the darkness and light are in balance. With the lengthening days comes a huge increase in the activity of our animal neighbors! The birds are nesting, gathering colorful bits of yarn we leave hanging for them to incorporate into their structures, some simple and others more complex. Most of the male goldfinches are in full summer plumage by now, their bright yellow and black standing out against the still-drab landscape, welcome color for our eyes grown tired of white, grey and brown. Their cousins the house finches are brighter, too, looking like brown birds dipped in raspberry juice.

Has there been a rainy night with temperatures in the 40s yet? If it hasn't happened already it will any day now. On this first warm, wet night of the year the spotted salamanders awaken and cross from their sleeping places to the ponds nearby. Perhaps there's a spot in your neighborhood where people celebrate this annual migration, staying out all night, awake with flashlights, making sure these little amphibians make it safely across the road. While they're watching they'll likely see wood frogs, too. The first frogs to awaken, resembling nothing so much as dead leaves floating on the surface of a vernal pool, make quite a racket during these last days of winter and the first days of spring. They can sound like a huge flock of tiny ducks, the males calling to the females with their rapid "quacks". They, like the salamanders, will only spend a short time in the ponds before they make their way up into the woods to camouflage among the leaf litter. They'll be followed in quick succession by the noisy chorus of spring peepers creating a raucous racket in the trees but so tiny that they're rarely seen.

Dip a net into those leaves under the water at the edge of the pond and you'll come up with a plethora of tiny creatures, the larvae of many kinds of insects from the fierce "water dragons" which are larvae of the predacious diving beetle, to the little wrigglers which will grow up to be mosquitoes. All these creatures will feed the frogs and salamanders and also the turtles, hungry after their long sleep.

They might even attract some hungry ducks, eagerly gobbling them up along with the newly hatched tadpoles.

Remember those bear cubs born under the snow? They're finally coming out to play and explore the world. So many creatures are waking up now. You can smell the skunks, nervous after so much time in their dens and letting loose with their powerful spray at the slightest provocation. Many of these animals have young and all of them are hungry! Some will feed on each other, or on our pets and livestock if we're not careful. Guard the chicken coop! The raccoons and foxes have babies to feed.

The warming soil will free a host of slugs, worms and grubs just perfect for skunks, opossums and even the bears. Tender shoots are beginning to poke up but it will still be a long time before fruits and vegetation are plentiful. The days and nights can still be cold, too, and March storms can be brutal. The light and darkness may be balanced but the animals still have a while to wait before they can truly celebrate the spring.



## Our Silent Companions: Spring Equinox

*Emily Care Boss*

With spring comes mud season. Loggers set aside their saws and wait until the snows melt and spring rains are through. This is time to look down. The trees are not yet awake. Instead the stage is set for dainty flowers, the spring ephemerals, that shine while the woods and fields around them are still brown and grey.

Ephemerals bloom and then are gone. Chancing upon a scarlet red Wake Robin trillium, one of the best known ephemerals, feels like a gift, a stolen moment. White Dutchman's breeches, violet striped spring beauty, white and gold blood root. You'll see blue and black cohosh unfurling their purple-black stems and leaves. Green ramps, wild onions, and yellow trout lilies standing at attention. Calcium weathered from stones sweetens the soil for the tender flowers. But just look, don't pick these rare beauties.

As the soil dries, the sawyers head back to the woods, taking in a good firewood from crooked or crowded trees, to season for next winter's cold; and prime timber from mature, straight boles, to make into boards and planks to build into a snug home. In fields it's time to plant the seeds and dig the rows that will blossom into a harvest of luscious greens, tasty carrots, squash and herbs to make your taste buds sing.

## The Spring Equinox in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

In late February and March, we follow the daily high temperatures and nightly lows as avidly as any of us ever followed March Madness. A high high and a low low really get the maple trees pumping. We greet each other in the mornings with thoughtful looks at the sky and “looks like a good year for the maple!” or “I’m worried about the maple this year, though.”

If you have a sugar maple in your yard, you tap it. Leaving a sugar maple untapped would be unthinkable, it’d be like leaving an apple tree to drop all its fruit.

### Maple Syrup

40 gallons maple sap

Put a gallon of maple sap to boil over a fire outdoors.

As it boils down, add sap.

You’re in it for the long haul.

It takes 40 gallons of sap to make 1 gallon of syrup.

If you cook it indoors, your kitchen fills with sugar steam and then it’s sticky from now on. Noob.

Unboiled maple sap tastes like fresh, clean, sweet, cold water. Meg says that it tastes like life. Her holiest birthday tradition is to go out at night and sneak dippers of it straight from our neighbor’s tap buckets.

## The Night Sky at the Spring Equinox *Epidiah Ravachol*

From this moment in space and time, low in the southern sky Scorpius the Scorpion lurks before dawn on a chill March morning. As the year progresses into summer, Scorpius will rise earlier and earlier in the night. The constellation is most easily recognized by the wicked hook of its tail and the beating of the red star in its heart.

Of the many tales of Scorpius, my favorite involves the hunter Orion, who boasted that he would hunt all the animals of the Earth to extinction. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt and therefore the *de facto* caretaker of all of Earth's creatures, took exception to this and implored Scorpius to slay him. The assassination either ended in a spectacular confrontation that drew the attention of the gods and earned both Scorpius and Orion their own places in the heavens, or it was an act so nefariously vile that Scorpius was banished to such a position among the stars that he would never be seen in the same sky with his hapless victim. Or perhaps he yet hunts the hunter, chasing after Orion through the year, but never gaining on him.

The most striking feature of Scorpius is the star Antares, which resides in the heart of the scorpion. It is a massive red supergiant—a star so huge its radius is more than three times the distance between us and our own Sun. From where we stand, it is one of the brightest stars in the sky, and though there are certainly brighter, it is identifiable by its distinctive red hue which is reminiscent of Mars, earning it a name that invokes Ares, the Greek name for the red planet.



## Early Summer The Joy of Sundresses

There is a certain moment every spring. This year it was on a Monday, when the sky was just the faintest bit hazy in the morning, and the sun was already peeping through and we knew: it was going to be hot. Not mild, not warm. Hot. Something we might have called “unseasonably hot” a month ago, but now it is the full ripe lush feeling of the impending summer. We’ll still have a few cold snaps, enough to keep things interesting, but for now, it’s time to dress for the weather. Sundresses bloom like flowers, legs sprout from shorts, hardly anyone wears a coat. People have skin again.

Through the winter in New England, we layer and layer and layer until the idea of bare flesh is but a memory, something to endure on the shivering dash between the shower and the sheets. We wear scarves and hats and gloves, and I joke about putting on our encounter suits to leave the house, but it’s true. The winter world demands certain concessions, and the feeling of sun on bare shoulders is one of the things we give up for six months of the year. So. Sundresses. There is something wild and delightful about a sundress. It’s one garment. One. And that is enough to keep you comfortable for the day. It seems impossible, to peel away the layers of sweaters, turtlenecks, undershirts, leggings, jeans, and woolly socks and at last skip out the door in a single layer. It almost seems indecent.

The skin of friends and strangers is shocking after a long winter. There’s so much of it! Look at all those arms! Those legs! It is as if we

are seeing elbows and clavicles for the first time, as if ankles and knees were still shrouded in Victorian modesty. And the cut of the cloth! There's no room to layer thermal underthings beneath that little sheath! How will you stay warm? How will you adapt to a sudden shift of wind? How will you survive?

And the answer is there, exactly there. We survive because we risk being vulnerable to each other. We risk the bright sun on winter-pale flesh, we risk the sudden breeze, we risk cold toes in sandals. We risk seeing someone walk across the park toward us in a flash of color and movement, and we risk smiling and saying hello, isn't it a lovely day? We have a moment now to chat, to meet someone new, to greet old friends we haven't seen since last fall's bonfire. The warmer weather thaws us as it thaws the ground. Our delight in touch, in the sweetness of a toddler's hand wrapped in ours, in the fellow-feeling of a hug from a friend we see only a few times a year, in the excitement of a partner's casual caress on a bare shoulder—all these feed our souls in a way that we have missed. We seek each other out, eager for our community of friends and loved ones, eager to be in touch with one another.



# A BRANCH OF MAY

*a short game about hide and seek*

For three to six players. You'll need ten six-sided dice for each player. Choose dice of a uniform color and size; a different color for each of you. You must have one set of green dice; for the others, yellow, white, pink, and bright blue recommended.

*Arise, arise my pretty fair maids  
And take your May bush in  
For if it is gone by tomorrow morrow morn  
They will say we have brought you none*

It is the first of May, and all the countryside is celebrating. The community gathers on the green, bringing flowers and sweets, music and laughter. The Green Man is abroad in the land, seeking his Queen of the May. You are a reveler, here to celebrate the spring. If you are revealed as the May Queen, you receive the blessing of the crowd, and may ask a favor and make a wish.

*We have been wandering all this night  
And almost all this the day  
And now returning home again  
We have brought you a branch of May*

Each of you hold ten dice. Whoever is holding the green dice is the Green Man for that roll. The Green Man declares the focus of his search for clues in this round—the sky, the trees, the music, the flowers, the cakes, the lovers in the crowd, etc. I search for my Queen in the fields and byways! Do I find any trace of her at the table of cakes and ale? I will seek her in the company of close companions! Perhaps she is sitting with the newborn babes?

*Tell not the clergy of our plight  
For they might call it sin  
We have been out in the woods all night  
We have conjured summer in.*

All of you roll your dice, and all of you except the Green Man put any dice showing sixes into the center. If you roll at least one six, add one detail in turn, to answer the Green Man's search. If the Green Man asked about the sky, you could say that the sky is as blue as the May Queen's eyes; she wears a shawl of soft white fleece like the clouds; birds fly overhead to mark her way. If he asked about the trees, you could say that the trees shudder in delight as she passes; her eyes are green as new leaves; her walk is as graceful as a willow tree. If he asked about the music, you could say that her voice is full of song; she wears bells on her skirts; etc. & etc.

If you don't roll any sixes, you pass.

*A branch of May we have brought you  
And at your door it stands  
It's nothing but a sprout, but it's well budded out  
By the work of our Lady's hand*

Pass the rest of your dice to the player on your left. There is now a new player rolling the green dice for the Green Man, and the rest of you might be rolling fewer dice than ten.

The steps repeat: the Green Man rotates each time, and sixes swing to the center. Roll your dice, ask your question, give your answers.

Play until one player has only one die remaining. If it's you, you're the May Queen! All of the rest of the players embrace, kiss, or otherwise greet you as the May Queen, and you may now ask a favor of the Green Man and make a wish. Speak the favor aloud if you like, but keep the wish secret as wishes are meant to be.

*The clock strikes one, it's time to be gone  
No longer can we stay  
Heaven bless you all both great and small  
And send you a joyful May!*

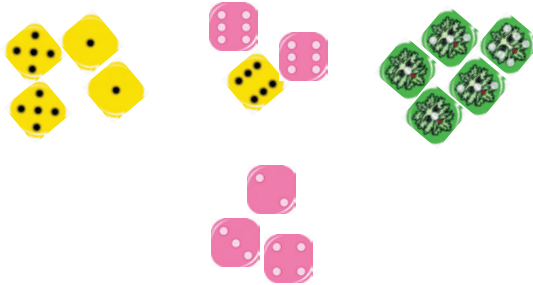
*The End*

## Rolling and Passing the Dice

All of you roll your dice...



...And all of you except the Green Man put any dice showing sixes into the center...



...Then pass the rest of your dice to the player on your left.



The steps repeat each turn: the Green Man rotates each time, and sixes swing to the center. Roll your dice, put your sixes to the center, ask your question, give your answers, pass to the left.



## Commentary: A Branch of May

The Green Man and the Queen of May are old ways of looking at the side of the divine that is concerned with fertility and all things that burst forth in the spring. New green plants, new baby animals, new contracts between people, new undertakings and ideas and plans. There is a playfulness to this time of year, when the weather can be beautiful and mild or cold and raw, and sometimes within the same 12-hour stretch! The hide-and-seek aspect of this game speaks to that as well as to the dance of courtship that all creatures undertake to find a companion for whatever purpose is at hand. The maypole and dancers in the artwork are yet another representation of the celebratory nature of this time of year. A pole bedecked with ribbons and greenery and boughs of flowering plants—forsythia and quince are most common around here—set into a hole in the village green to signify the hope of prosperity and increase in the endeavors of the people who dance and sing and reconnect around the common.

The movement of the dice, with the rotation of the Green Man dice and the sixes swinging into the center, echoes these dances. This is intended to underline the connection between the players and the surprise of making meaningful connections.

## Animals of Early Summer

*Jodi Levine*

The violets are blooming, there is pollen everywhere and the butterflies are here! Blue azures and white cabbage butterflies are fluttering through the spring blooms. The bluebirds are back, the toads have been trilling and the broad winged hawks have returned from their winter migration. Ah, May, season of mating and frolicking! Now that food is plentiful at last, something beyond the bitter skunk cabbage of March, everyone is relaxing a bit and enjoying the warm air.

An amazing thing is happening in our rivers right now. The anadromous fish, the shad, herring, salmon and others who are born in the rivers and swim to the sea, are making the return journey up the rivers to the riverbeds where they were spawned, ready to lay their eggs. Some have changed so much from their time in the briny ocean that for them this is a one-way trip. By the time they swim the many miles, leaping over rocks and sometimes being lifted by elevator over dams (we humans have to help sometimes), they will be blind, their systems failing, able to hang on just long enough to spawn before they die. Many won't even make it that far—the ospreys, cormorants and seagulls are waiting along the route, excited at the easy pickings offered by the running fish. Bears, too, await a tasty meal, reaching into the water and batting at the fish with their broad paws. Of course, many humans thrill to this annual migration, too. Though the herring aren't as essential to our diet as they once were, shad derbies are still popular. Despite the dangers, though, and despite the many man-made obstacles in their way, many fish do reach their destination, enabling the cycle to begin again for another year.

Make way for ducklings! The mallards, wood ducks, Canadian geese and more are sitting on their clutches, hidden in the tall grasses near the water. The first ducklings and goslings are starting to hatch, though many more will emerge in the next few weeks, ready to trail behind their parents as they swim contentedly, learning by watching and imitating.

Many woodland creatures are giving birth, too. Baby porcupines, their quills soft only until they dry off, are coming into the world, and new fawns, their white spots helping them camouflage in the dappled sunlight are being born, too, and that's just naming two. Ah, May! Ah, Spring! So much life and summer hasn't even begun.

## Our Silent Companions: Early Summer

*Emily Care Boss*

The May comes. The trees are awake, the birds sing, the sun shines. All nature rejoices. You may dance the May as the Queen and her Green Man do. Or you may walk in the woods and see which trees blossom with the brush of the sun. Black locust blooms white, and the bees cluster to them. The tree drinks deep of the atmosphere and fixes nitrogen in the soil. Though locust is a pest tree, an invasive, its virtues are many: dense, durable wood that resists rot. It makes beautiful fence posts. Dogwoods parade their crisp green-white petal-like bracts. Linden and shadbush shower their delicate white flowers.

In the garden, a riot of color takes hold. Yellow and orange daffodil, and their tiny echoes: the paperwhite narcissus. Violet rhododendrons towering above the endless colors and varieties of tulips: peach, white, blood red, purple-black. My favorite flowering shrub gives a wild variety of colors—azaleas in bell white, flame red, fuchsia, glowing orange.

## Early Summer in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

I hear that asparagus was the traditional symbolic food of the Roman Saturnalia. They'd harvest it in the spring and take it by wagonloads high up into the Alps, effectively refrigerating it until midwinter.

I also hear that asparagus won't grow most places, and that the Northern Connecticut river valley is one of the few exceptions. It's a point of local pride. In May and June we get asparagus from the roadside farm stands, and we barely ever eat it otherwise. (For Saturnalia we make an exception and buy it in the grocery store, shipped from Mexico or Chile.)

### Asparagus

Fresh asparagus

Olive oil

Garlic

Salt

Pepper

Snap the bottom of each asparagus stalk off at a conveniently tender point.

Crush and finely chop garlic.

Heat oil. Cook garlic for just a few seconds.

Add asparagus. Toss to coat with oil.

Add a spoonful of water. Cover.

Shake the pan.

Cook until the asparagus is bright green and toasted brown in a few places.

Sprinkle with coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper.

## The Night Sky in Early Summer

*Epidiah Ravachol*

While the stars appear fixed with relation to one another, our perspective on them changes with every hour of the night, and where they are on a given hour of a night changes with every day of year. To find a star in an obscure or faint constellation, it helps to start with the familiar and obvious. In early May, if we look northward after sunset and find the Big Dipper, we can follow the arc of its handle eastward across the sky towards the bright star Arcturus and then speed on our course to the dimmer star Spica, which is in the constellation Virgo.

Many myths of the ancient world cast Spica and Virgo as wheat, grain, fields, or goddesses of the harvest. Spica's rising just after sunset would have made an excellent reminder of when to sow the fields, and its inevitable disappearance in autumn would signal harvest preparations.



## Midsummer For Amber Waves of Grain

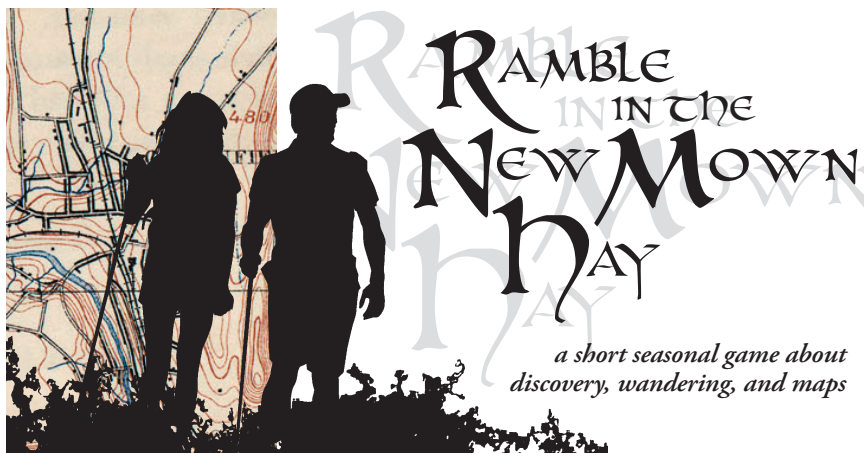
The song goes “as I was walking, that ribbon of highway, I saw above me the endless skyway: I saw below me, the golden valley—this land was made for you and me.” I live in a golden valley, and I’ve roamed and rambled the whole length and breadth of it. The land here has been farmed for thousands of years, with fields kept in a rotation of corn and beans and squash long before the arrival of Europeans. The fields in high summer really do make the landscape look like treasure boxes of gold and green, and the hills really do look plum-colored in the summer evening twilight. It’s a good time to get outdoors, when the days are long and leave us with time to wander after the work of the day is finished. The sunlight makes everything shine, and every corner feels like an adventure. The fields and waysides are full of the unexpected—we might find wild berries, or startle a little animal, or come upon the perfect rock for sitting and watching the river roll by. With long summer evenings, a walk around town can be as welcome as a stroll in the wilds. People are outside, music drifts through open windows, and the world seems fuller and riper than it did six months ago in the deep winter when everything was waiting.

The warmth allows us to linger, to look up, or down, and take our time soaking it all in.

It’s not just the new things that hold wonder, it’s the familiar things as well. Summer is a great time for revisiting favorite places, for exploring in greater detail or for a longer time that we may have

before. What we pass by every day is as worthy of note as that which is new to our eyes. Old buildings and well-trod forest trails both have things to share that we may have overlooked before. It's a change in perspective, and when we pay attention to our surroundings, we see more clearly how our lives intersect with everything around us.





For solo play or with a group. You'll need ten assorted six-sided dice total; golden yellow, green, amber, and bright blue recommended, odd dice encouraged. You will also need a copy of the table at the end, on a card to carry with you on your ramble.

*I like to rise when the sun she rises  
 Early in the morning  
 I like to hear them small birds singing  
 Merrily upon the lay-land  
 And hurrah for the life of a country kid  
 And to ramble in the new-mown hay*

Bonfires and sweet cut grass, first harvest and long days. The fullness of the summer solstice is in every heavy-laden vine and ripe headed stalk. Time for a walk about the lands. Put your dice in one pocket, grab a water bottle and a snack and head out the door. Or, take a pleasant seat in the shade and settle back to journey in your mind's eye.

*In spring we sow at the harvest mow  
 And that is how the seasons round they go  
 But if all the times if choose I may  
 't would be rambling through the new-mown hay*

When you reach the first intersection, take the first die from your pocket and roll it. Odds mean to take the left-hand path, evens mean to take the right. The number means how long you travel, in steps, or minutes, or turnings passed, or miles. Decide now which it shall be. Follow the direction of the first die, tuck it in a different pocket,

and when you come to an intersection or the time is up or you have passed enough turnings, roll the next die.

*I like to rise when the sun she rises  
Early in the morning  
I like to hear them small birds singing  
Merrily upon the lay-land  
And hurrah for the life of a country kid  
And to ramble in the new-mown hay*

Repeat as above with all your remaining dice, one by one, asking at each turning “What is ripe here?” “What is familiar? “What is unexpected?” If you are rambling with a group, take turns pointing out something interesting to each other—a leaf, a sunbeam, a rock wall, a horizon. If you are rambling solo, take time to notice and appreciate at least one interesting thing at each turning on your ramble. Watch for metaphors and internal journeys as well as physical and external signs. After three dice, have a drink of your water if you haven’t yet. After six dice, find a place to sit and have your snack. After nine dice, stretch and then be still long enough to hear nine different sounds. If you are with a group, you can share sounds.

*In winter when the sky is grey  
We hedge and ditch our times away  
But in the summer when the sun shines gay  
We go rambling through the new-mown hay*

Take the last die from your pocket. Roll it as the rest, and follow its lead. When you reach your journey’s end, look around as if seeing it for the first time—perhaps you actually are! Think about the path you have taken, the unexpected things you have encountered, and what you have discovered about yourself and your environment. Find a place to leave that last die where it is tucked safe out of the way, but also may be found by some other wanderer. Make a wish for them and one for yourself.

*I like to rise when the sun she rises  
Early in the morning  
I like to hear them small birds singing  
Merrily upon the lay-land  
And hurrah for the life of a country kid  
And to ramble in the new-mown hay*

Head home the way you came, or play again using the nine dice that remain.

**Odd** means go left. **Even** means go right.

At **each die roll**, ask:

“What is ripe here?”

“What is familiar?”

“What is unexpected?”

At **the 3<sup>rd</sup> die**, drink some water.

At **the 6<sup>th</sup> die**, have a snack.

At **the 9<sup>th</sup> die**, stretch and listen for nine different sounds.

At **the 10<sup>th</sup> die**, think about the path you’ve taken and what you’ve discovered.

## Commentary: Ramble in the New-mown Hay

There's not a whole lot of symbolism here; it's as straight-forward as a walk in the woods or a stroll around town. We sometimes become accustomed to the things we see every day, and by putting them in a new context, we can discover the world around us anew. If you are playing this in a city, remember to look up! The buildings and architecture reveal a whole different landscape waiting to be noticed. If you are playing this in a field or forest, get down on the ground and see what it looks like at a different level—there are lots of little fairy holes and beetle paths to see a foot off the ground.

There is significance in the numbers 3, 6, and 9 as the points where something a little unusual happens. Three is a number associated with mystery and wonder—humans have two of lots of things; arms, eyes, lungs, etc, but three is something new. Two humans can make a third human, two humans can witness the actions of a third and corroborate each other's story, and two humans can ask a third human to help them resolve a disagreement. Six is three balanced and matched, and nine is three times three. In fairy tales, we very often encounter things in sets of three, because it connects to this very small step into the realm of the mysterious. Enjoy the path to discovery!

## Animals of Midsummer

*Jodi Levine*

The nests are full of nestlings and there are bright flashes of blue in the trees, marking the return of the indigo buntings. The weather is lovely, not yet too hot to enjoy, though the black flies may be making nuisances of themselves. It's Midsummer's Eve, oddly named since it's just the very beginning of what promises to be a summer teeming with life and promising to get hotter and stickier.

The green frogs have begun to sing in the ponds, their call sounding like nothing so much as someone plucking an out of tune banjo string. The crazy insect chorus, the katydids, crickets and cicadas, won't be starting up for at least a month and the tree frogs, so loud a few weeks ago, are quiet now, finished with their courtship rituals, so this unlikely sound will be the musical accompaniment to this evening's festivities. The light show, though, is fantastic! It's peak firefly season and we are treated to several species each flashing its lights in that special pattern designed to enchant and attract a mate. Children chase them through the meadows, eager to capture the light in a jar for an hour or two. Be sure to let them go, though. Much as it brings us joy, their dance is for each other, not for us. We can dance in the meadows, too, though, along with the rabbits and the deer, the bats overhead and the voles tunneling beneath our feet, enjoying the longest day and the shortest night of the year. Happy Summer!

## Our Silent Companions: Midsummer

*Emily Care Boss*

June brings good weather for a ramble in the new mown hay. In the fields the first cut is being taken in. Farmers will be watching the weather anxiously for a window of dry, sunny days when the hay is well grown. Once mown, the hay must cure until it is just dry enough to bale.

The trees in the woods have stepped into their full green now. Glorious and soaking in the sunlight to lay on another year's growth. Each year a new ring, like ripples into eternity. Bird and beasts in the forest make their nests in the trees, some are gone by now, but flaky, shaggy bark makes an ideal nursery for bat pups.

## Midsummer in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

When we were still students our July 4 tradition was to tramp and ramble all over the valley, hills, fields, railroad tracks, bike paths, searching out wild-growing blackcap raspberries. Now that we've settled down, we grow them right in our own yard.

It's like having a wolf pup for a pet. It's a constant struggle for dominance. The berry bramble knows neither moderation nor decency. It spreads both by seeding and by leapfrogging and re-rooting its canes. It believes that it lives at the top of a sweeping meadow and it is voracious in its spread. It's all we can do to hack it back into its designated space and keep it from swallowing our house, yard, and all.

Blackcaps are the color of blackberries when they're ripe, but they're a variety of raspberry. They have a wild, herbal sweetness, sweeter than blackberries and more complex than red raspberries. Competition is fierce but if you make me choose, they're my favorite fruit.

### Blackcap Pie

6 cups blackcaps, separated  
Sugar  
Cornstarch  
Pre-cooked pie shell

Rinse half the blackcaps and set to drain.

Sprinkle the other half well with sugar in a saucepan. Cook over medium heat until the berries break down.

Spread the drained berries in the pie shell.

Put the cooked berries into a mesh strainer over a bowl. Press with the back of a wooden spoon to extract all the juice and pulp and leave the seeds behind.

Make a paste with cornstarch and water.

Return the juice and pulp to the saucepan and return to the heat. Stir cornstarch paste into the juice and cook to thicken.

Pour thickened gel over the berries in the pie shell and spread gently to cover evenly.

Refrigerate until set.

If you really want to wow 'em, stir a spoonful of orange blossom water into the thickened gel.

This recipe is great for blueberries too.

Meg asks me to remind you not to throw out the seeds from the cooked and strained pulp. They stick in my teeth something awful, but she doesn't care. She eats them by the spoonful.



## The Night Sky at Midsummer

*Epidiah Ravachol*

High overhead in the middle of the summer night we see the Summer Triangle, a simple asterism made of the stars Vega, Altair, and Deneb. Each of these stars have their own constellations and stories in Greek myths, but together they make up an easily recognizable wedge cutting across the plane of the Milky Way throughout the summer.

From Earth, the Milky Way looks like a creamy splash across the night sky. This is our galaxy that we are viewing from on edge as an ant sees the plate as she stands on its rim. It's a massive collection of stars, planets, dust and gas all blurred together by their distance from us. The meandering smudge of the Milky Way encircles the entire sky so that, absent light pollution and cloud cover, it can be seen from anywhere on any given night. Cultures the world round saw it as a mighty river.

Vega and Altair sit on opposite sides of the Milky Way, forever separated by this silver river. In Chinese myth these two stars are respectively known as Zhinü the weaver girl and Niulang the cowherd, forbidden lovers held apart by the torrents of the Milky Way. As with any myth, the particulars of this tale differ with each telling, but in many cases Zhinü is a woman born of goddesses and the heavens who weaves beautiful clouds, and Niulang is but a mortal. And as you might expect, someone of great power is displeased with Zhinü taking an interest in such an earthly creature, often creating the Milky Way for the sole purpose of keeping these two from each others arms. So Zhinü must sit by her celestial loom—Vega's constellation of Lyra—and if the displeased power was not so swift, Niulang is left alone to care for their two—the two stars nearest Altair in its constellation of Aquila.

But this doom is lifted once a year when the magpies of the world come together and form a bridge over the star Deneb so that these two lovers may enjoy a single night together, an event that is celebrated on Earth as the Qixi Festival.



## Early Autumn The Whip of August

There's a change that happens every year right around the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. For a week or so before, there will be moments, mostly mornings, when the world is expansive and beautifully green. The humidity breaks long enough for everyone to breathe deeply and the rain overnight washes the pollen from the air, leaving the air so clear and fresh and energized. Then one day, and surprisingly often right on the 1st or 2nd, you can feel it: autumn is around the corner.

The snap in the air is the crack of the whip. It says wake up! Get out of that hammock and think ahead! The farmers' market is filled with the work of many hands, in bushels and baskets and in such abundance. The work of the farmers shows in their faces, tired even through the smiles brought on by brisk sales. No one actually wants to get up at 6 in the morning and weed or harvest before the sun gets too hot (although some of us do it anyway, and the farmers are up with the first light at 5). We get heated into lassitude in July. The sun warms the water and even if we get a little rain, it heats on its way over the rocks to the river and swimming is so pleasant. Come August, there's just enough difference between air and water to make us shiver and some of us think twice about getting wet.

Suddenly, you start to see signs everywhere. The odd branch of olive or slightly yellowed leaves on a tree otherwise green. The last withered berries no one managed to pick when they were ripe. The golden glow of late summer flowers, after the day lilies pass. The "end of

season” signs appear by the berries in the grocery store. All of this means hurry, be quick, prepare. Buy a case of blueberries to freeze for winter. Make plans for that trip to the beach, because soon it will be too late. And when you flip the calendar to August, there it is at the end of the month: kids go back to school.

Two hundred years ago, summer in New England was the busiest time, the work time, when everyone who could tend the crops and bring in the harvest was needed. Children were needed to sow seeds, weed, water, tend livestock, to help with the haying in June and July so the animals had food through the winter, and to gather in the food their family would eat or sell or trade. The cycle of productivity that begins in February with buying seeds, and flows through setting starts in March to planting in May and weeding in June, all comes to a culmination in August.

For those families, school was the secondary concern, the thing to do now that the real work was complete and the barns and attics and root cellars and pantries were full for the winter. The long winter of quieter pastimes had begun. There were skating parties and bonfires to look forward to, and other diversions, but the agricultural year was at the low point in the winter.

Now, the push of school upends the cycle. When everything else is moving toward stillness and introspection, students and families everywhere are pushed outwards. We go through backpacks and make lists of needed supplies, and I make the kids try on all their pants and long-sleeved shirts so the outgrown ones can be replaced. It's too hot by far for wearing corduroy, but better to check now than to need them in November and find they are too small.

Do not take the lassitude of July as the constant state of things. Look around you, see what needs to be done, and do it. Help each other out. Paint the barn, move house, find a new job, get ready to leave one part of your life and start another. Gather in. Make ready. Prepare.



# hounds hounds hounds OF THE HARVEST

*a short seasonal game about work and rest*

For three to five players. You'll need ten six-sided dice for each player. Choose dice of a uniform color and size; a different color for each of you. Brown, black, grey, coppery-red, golden, white or a mottled mix of these colors recommended.

In the fields, the Great Hound walks, waiting for the Hunt that will come with the cold. Now is the time of watching, of preparing, of work. The sun is hot hot hot overhead. The people are consumed with work, bringing in baskets and wagons and carloads of things. You are a dog. Your job is to keep the fields safe, to protect the work and the workers. See the harvest secure, and you may lay your burdens down at the feet of the Great Hound. What kind of dog are you, and what crops or livestock do your people grow?

*Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,  
Bring me li'l water, now,  
Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,  
Ev'ry li'l once in a while.*

You are burdened, each in your own way. Turn to the player on your left. They choose your burden from the list below, and describe how it manifests for your character. To yourself, think how it manifests for you in the real world. Players may have duplicate burdens.

**The heat is oppressive**—even moving or making choices is hard in these conditions

**The press of time is mighty**—too much to do, always too much

**The thirst is deep**—for praise, for recognition, for confidence

**The need for company is great**—someone to talk to and share with would help

**The day is long**—dawn to dusk is fifteen hours, and work goes before and after

**The chain is short**—obligation and responsibility lie heavy

*Don't you hear me callin' Sylvie  
Don't you hear me callin' now  
Don't you hear me callin' Sylvie  
Ev'ry li'l once in a while?*

Turn to the player on your right. They say one thing you have that might help lighten the load—a sense of humor, a strong back, perspective, commitment, a good night's rest the night before, loving owners, etc. To yourself, think what your own strengths may be. Go around the circle until every player has a burden and a strength.

*Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,  
Bring me li'l water, now,  
Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,  
Ev'ry li'l once in a while.*

Whichever player has the hardest work begins play. On your turn, roll three of your dice. You and the other players say something about each of them, following this guide:

**When you roll a 1**, things are hard. The rabbits, the foxes, the birds, the worms—these are your foes. Chase them, worry them, kill them if you can. Storm, hail, fire, accident—these are the threats of nature. Alert your people, work alongside them, run for help if needed. Tell about the foes or threats to the crops and your fight to drive them back. The player to your left tells how your burden hinders the work and slows the process. Set these dice aside for the reckoning that ends the game. They may not be rerolled.

**When you roll a 2 or 3**, describe the people in the fields, their worries and their hopes, the rhythms of the work. Leave these dice to be rerolled.

**When you roll a 4 or 5**, describe the movements of the Great Hound and the encroaching first tendrils of the coming autumn. Leave these dice to be rerolled.

**When you roll a 6**, the player to your right tells how your strength makes the work easier and more joyful. Set 6s aside for the reckoning

that ends the game—these are your guard against the hungry and the cold and may not be rerolled.

**If you roll doubles of the same number between 2 and 5,** you may share one with another player. Set one aside for yourself, and pass one to another player for them to set aside —these are your guard against the lonely and the fear, and are not rerolled. If you are low in 6s and choose to leave these dice to be rerolled instead of sharing them, you must reroll both. If you roll triples, the same: keep one and pass one each to other players.

*Don't you hear me comin'?*

*Don't you hear me comin', now?*

*Don't you hear me comin'?*

*Ev'ry li'l once in a while?*

**When your turn comes and you have fewer dice left than three,** gather all the remaining dice in play and roll them all at once, yours and other players' together. This is the end of the season, the last great rush to bring in the crops. Roll all the dice yourself and pass them back to their owners; golden to golden, brown to brown, white to white, etc.

Any ones are foes and threats to that player, any sixes are harvests safely brought in for that player, any duplicate 2-3-4-5s are shared out between that player and whomever they choose. Any dice left unmatched remain in the fields, gleanings for those animals in greater need. Take stock of what dice come to you from this final push, and describe how the season comes to a close for you and your people, for good or ill.

*Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,*

*Bring me li'l water, now,*

*Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,*

*Every li'l once in a while*

Tally up how many crops you have secured (6s) and how many you have lost (1s). If your harvest (6s) outweighs your hardships (1s), you are safe from the hungry and the cold. If the two are tied, you make it through with care, but it is a close thing. If your hardships are more numerous, winter bites hard and deep.

Tally your shared dice. If you have more of your own dice, you have taken in more than you give. If you have more of others' dice, you have given out more than you have taken. Either way, think what you might do to balance the scales in the coming year.

*Getting' mighty thirsty Sylvie  
Getting' mighty thirsty now  
Getting' mighty thirsty Sylvie  
Ev'ry li'l once in a while?*

If your harvest outweighs your hardships, you are safe from the hungry and the cold. If you also have some shared connection with your community, you are safe from the lonely and the fear. You may lay your burden down. Describe how this manifests, laying down your burdens before the Great Hound, having worked faithfully and well.

Lay your own burden down as well, letting it sink into the ground to dissolve and disintegrate, to be transformed in the months ahead. Make a wish or ask a favor of the Great Hound, who will guard you and comfort you through the coming cold.

*Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,  
Bring me li'l water, now,  
Bring me li'l water, Sylvie,  
Every li'l once in a while*

*The End*



**When you roll a 1**, things are hard. The player to your left tells how your burden hinders the work and slows the process. These dice may not be rerolled.



**When you roll a 2 or 3**, describe the people in the fields, their worries and their hopes, the rhythms of the work. Leave these dice to be rerolled.



**When you roll a 4 or 5**, describe the movements of the Great Hound and the encroaching first tendrils of the coming autumn. Leave these dice to be rerolled.



**When you roll a 6**, the player to your right tells how your strength makes the work easier and more joyful. Set 6s aside for the reckoning that ends the game—these may not be rerolled.

**If you roll doubles of the same number between 2 and 5**, you may share one with another player.

## Commentary: Hounds of the Harvest

The Great Hound is the personification of the force that compels us forward, that nips at our heels and says “get a move on!” It’s not always friendly, but if we learn to work with it, we can get a lot done in a short time. There is also a nod here to the idea of the Wild Hunt, a portrayal of the divine as strong and potent and unstoppable when it gets something in its sights. In all the faiths I know of, the divine is not always benevolent and indulgent. Sometimes it says to us “Do the work before you look for the relief.”

The other symbolism here is in the act of sharing any surplus you have. It’s harder to make it through tough times alone, and the connections we have with each other lift us all. Being mindful of where we are in need and where we can give helps us foster our reserves in a more sustainable way, and reach a time of relaxation sooner and in better company.



## Animals of Early Autumn

*Jodi Levine*

Oh, the fecundity of high summer! Life is everywhere, from the flocking birds to the ponds full of frogs and turtles to the ever-present swarming insects. Spring's babies are growing quickly and sometimes we're lucky enough to see the young fawns frolicking in the fields or the fox and raccoon kits, up way past their bedtimes since they're active by day, roughhousing on the lawn.

Food is abundant everywhere and so everyone is feasting. The ponds are covered with a skim of duckweed and algae, feasted on by turtles and insect larvae. The water striders skate confidently over the water's surface and the dragonflies swoop and dive, snapping them up. They, in turn, are chased by the bats and swallows. The fish are jumping out of the water and the herons are standing patiently in the shallows, waiting to thrust out their long necks and pointed bills and grab the unwary. Some creatures are predators, some are prey and many can be both depending which way you look on the food chain.

The meadows are swarming with butterflies by day and our porch lights seethe with moths by night. The bullfrogs loudly announce themselves, as do the redwing blackbirds and so many others. The ducks and geese are trailed by their offspring as they thoroughly enjoy swimming in the warm, weedy water. Everyone is celebrating the heat and abundant sunshine and nobody is thinking about the autumn to come. It's the biggest party of the year!

If you listen closely, though, the nighttime chorus has subtly changed, different melodies and rhythms than even a couple of weeks back. The light is just a little lower, the sunset just a little earlier and the insects know it. The fireflies still twinkle, tamely compared to June's light show. Enjoy your summer Bacchanalia while you can, creatures. It may seem like it will last forever but change is coming.

## Our Silent Companions: Early autumn

*Emily Care Boss*

As the summer goes on, the trees set their buds for the next year's growth. The heat comes on and we all try to find some relief. Harvest is here, which can be a joy and burden. So hard to catch up with the zucchinis in the garden! Each day a new crop pops into ripeness—black raspberries on the stem, green bush beans, summer squash in profusion.

In the woods, the birds, bears and raccoons have a feast. Black cherry grows lush, and the many wild grapes ripen. From the small tart Concord grape to the round midnight marbles of Muscat or fox grapes, the trees are twined with a bounty. If you are lucky, you may notice a beech mast year and beat the animals to the shaggy seed pods. Unlike acorns you can husk these tri-corner nuts and eat their seeds just as they are.

The colors of this time of year are purple, green and gold. In meadows you'll see endless varieties of goldenrod. Ramrod straight, and glorying in their clustered flowers the color of the sun. Blamed for allergies, they take the heat due the unobtrusive ragweeds with their fine lacy leaves and long rows of bud-like green flowers. Wild and planted mountain aster complete the color trio: their purple petals surrounding golden centers, like a violet corona around many tiny suns.

## Early Autumn in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

Here's a recipe to beat the heat.

### Salsa Mary

Ripe tomatoes, chopped  
Scallions, chopped  
Cilantro, chopped  
Fresh lime juice  
Olive oil  
Salt  
Whole jalepeño  
Leftover corn scraped from the cob (optional, see below)

Scorch and blacken the jalepeño all over, directly over a stovetop burner. Let it cool. Scrape the blackened skin off. Finely chop the flesh; discard the seeds.

Combine all ingredients.

Drain in a sieve over a bowl.

Pour the liquid over ice. It's delicious even without a little gin.

I guess you can serve the solids with tortilla chips or something? Seriously I make this stuff for the spicy chilled tomato-cilantro-lime juice, and I make it in quantity. My kids are like "dad, there is TOO MUCH SALSA" and I'm smiling contentedly with a glass in my hand. I don't even know what they're talking about.

### Corn on the Cob

Husk corn.

Boil water.

Add the corn to the boiling water. This is important! Bring the water to the boil first, then add the corn. If you put the corn in cold water and bring it to the boil, you'll toughen the kernels.

Cook for just a few minutes, only until tender-crisp. The corn's probably done even before the water returns to the boil.

Meg prefers corn boiled, I prefer it oven-roasted, but really, it's summer and it's sweetcorn from the roadside farm stand and there's nothing wrong on this earth.

## Roast Corn in the Husk

Preheat your oven to 350.

Put unpeeled corn straight into the oven.

Roast for 20-30 minutes.

You can cook it this way on a grill too.

If you have any corn left over, which we never do but maybe you will, cut the kernels from the cob and add them to tomorrow's salsa mary.

## The Night Sky in Early Autumn

*Epidiah Ravachol*

Before we move on to autumn, we must check in on Orion as he flees from Scorpius. I would not call him a coward. Few among us wouldn't flee from a scorpion of such size. As summer wanes, Scorpius wanders from the night sky and Orion tentatively appears, most readily recognized by the slightly misshapen hourglass made of the stars in his shoulders, the stars in his knees, and the three stars across his cinched waist that make up his belt. Following the line made by his belt eastward, you will find Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky and second only to our own Sun.

Sirius is in the constellation of Canis Major, one of Orion's hunting dogs, and is itself known as the Dog Star. It is actually a binary star system, two stars closely orbiting each other, although we cannot see the difference without a telescope. Perhaps due to its brilliance, Sirius makes for an excellent demarcation on ancient calendars. When Sirius first rises just before the dawn, it heralds in and lends its name to the dog days of summer, that sweltering season when nothing is worth doing.

As we progress through the year, the Orion and his dogs will rise earlier and earlier in the night, eventually becoming dominant features in the winter sky until Scorpius comes round again to chase them out.



## Autumn Equinox Adventures in Autumn

In late September, the air cools at last. All the work, all the labor of the year, comes to its fruition. Apples are everywhere, ready to pick, and pears and squash. Vines full of ripening pumpkins don't need tending or weeding anymore. We look for the first real turning leaves, the splash of red or orange amidst the green. Squirrels are everywhere, dashing with full cheeks for storage holes they hope only they remember. The parades and county fairs are over, the ribbons have been awarded and tucked away alongside the canning jars and seed packets.

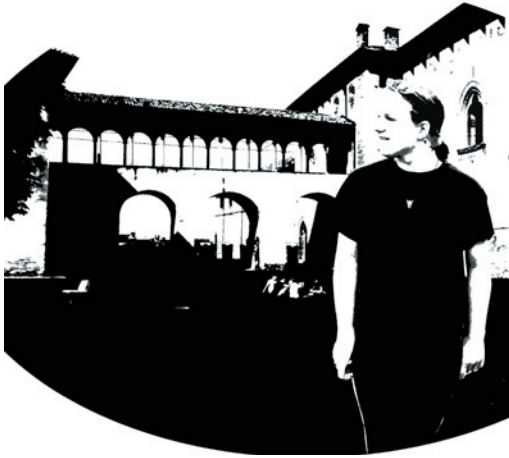
The work of the year is complete. What's done is done. What has been planted and nurtured has grown, and it is time to celebrate, reflect, let go and plan ahead. It's time to climb a mountain.

Mountains in New England are plentiful, accessible, and give you enough of a vantage point to look out over the familiar landscape and see how far you have come, or how much you have changed since you last stood on this mountain. We carry water bottles and wear windbreakers, because we will get hot with the effort, but chilled in the wind at the top—Autumn is a time of contradictions, opposites and transitions.

Start out at the bottom, with your eyes wide, looking everywhere. The trees are in their fine array, and falling leaves shimmer in the light. Bluejays call warnings and squirrels natter back. Climb the path and the wind rushes to meet you, light slanting golden beneath

dark clouds. The valley below is a gradient of houses and roads giving way to distant hills covered in trees of every hue. At the top, climb far out on the rocky lichen-covered ledge, leaving the stone benches for others.

Look! A red-tailed hawk flies up from the trees in front of us, catches the wind in its wings and hovers, then comes within 50 feet of where we stand. This hawk is just gliding on the currents, one with the air. We are so cloistered from the world that there are people down in the buildings below who do not know the wind is blowing, that do not know the sun's coming out, that never heard a hawk cry its piercing cry as it hangs motionless in the sky. Ponder this as the sun breaks through and suddenly the sky is blue and white again, a sundog of gold and cream and orange on the fleeting rainclouds. Eat an apple on the way back down, slicing it crosswise to reveal the star within. Eat even the pips, despite the things your grandmother told you. Descend again to the town. The sun still shines and the leaves still change colors even if no one sees. Nature is inescapable. This is the gift of the mountain, its constancy and its inescapable presence. It will carry on through the coming winter, as it has through thousands of winters before. So can you.



# THE BENDING OF THE BOW

*a game of harvest, leave-taking,  
and thanksgiving*

For three to four players. You'll need ten six-sided dice for each player. Choose dice of a uniform color and size; a different color for each of you. Red, orange, yellow, gold, and brown recommended. You will also need two cards or small pieces of paper per player.

*And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said,  
Speak to us of Children.*

The Autumn Equinox is upon you. What's done is done. What you have nurtured and tended this year, these many years, has come to its fruition. Today is the close of one chapter, the turning of a page, the shifting of the wheel, the start of a new journey. Strike a balance between the light and the dark, and you may yet send a wish forward into the unknown future. Take your two pieces of paper and mark one of them Dark and one of them Light.

*And he said: Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.*

Take your ten dice in your two hands. **Think of your heart's wish for the things you have accomplished, the things yet to be, the things you set forth upon the universe.** From the list below, decide which number best fits the wish you hold in your heart, and keep this number secret alongside your wish.

**1:** A wish for **contentment**

**2:** A wish for **abundance**

**3:** A wish for **adventure**

**4:** A wish for **gratitude**

**5:** A wish for **connection**

**6:** A wish for **expression**



Now give half your dice to the player on your left. Set the five dice handed to you on your card marked Light. Write the number of your heart's wish on the back of your Dark card, make sure no-one can see it, and set your own five dice on the card marked Dark.

*They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*

A traveler walks across the land, their destination clear, their step with purpose. **Go around the circle now and create the traveler together.** Each player add one thing to the traveler's appearance or outlook on the world, being sure that the traveler has at least a name and an age before rolling dice.

*You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.*

Once you've described the traveler, take turns rolling dice, starting with the player who has most recently started a new undertaking or a journey of some kind. **On your turn, choose which of your two colors to roll. If you choose Dark, describe something dark on the traveler's journey**—a deep and shady forest, storm clouds, a bruise, a tart brown drink, a cruel word, the dark red skin of an apple, a beautiful moonless night. **If you choose Light, describe something light on the traveler's journey**—a carefree step, a ray of sunshine, a chill wind, the creamy flesh of a sweet pear, a mosquito, a caress, an empty purse. Incorporate and build on each other's words.

*You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.*

**On your first turn, roll five dice of one color, Dark or Light, and add some detail about the things and experiences that prepared the traveler for this journey.** Your goal is to reach the full house by making each color you roll show 3 of one kind & 2 of another, or else 5 of a kind, and to see a piece of the traveler's journey. **On your second turn, you may roll the five dice of the second color, or choose to reroll any dice of the first color. The first time you roll the five dice of the second color, share some words of wisdom, light or dark, the traveler was given on setting out.** On your initial roll of each color, choose what number or numbers you are aiming for and wish to keep when you reroll the rest.

*You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.*

*For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.*

Any time you reroll remaining dice of either color, choose from the appropriate list and add details, building on what has gone before. **You may reroll up to three times in a turn, keeping any dice you wish to keep.** Use the number of rolls as a guide for the passage of time; one roll is as little as a moment and no longer than one day, two rolls is at least a day and no longer than a month, three rolls is at least a week and as long as a year. **Remember to include something light or something dark, depending on the dice you roll:**

**4 dice rerolled, light or dark:**

*Choose one of the below that you have not yet answered.*

**3 dice rerolled, light or dark:**

*What person or animal demands the traveler's interaction in some way before passing through?*

*What place do you hope to someday visit?*

*What is noticeable about this part of the traveler's path?*

*Tell about a time you made something.*

*What skill or strength supports the traveler on their journey?*

*If you could carry one thing with you always, what would it be?*

**2 dice rerolled, light or dark:**

*What does the traveler hope for at the journey's end?*

*Tell about a time you let something go—a project, and idea, a person, etc.*

*What feature of the landscape most captivates the traveler's attention?*

*Tell about an interesting, beautiful or intense thing you've seen.*

*What does the traveler leave behind here, knowingly or not?*

*If you could go back and say goodbye to someone, who would it be??*

**1 die rerolled, light or dark:**

*What is difficult about this part of the traveler's journey?*

*Tell about your favorite thing to investigate.*

*How does the traveler meet challenges they face?*

*What makes you feel welcome?*

*What does the traveler gather on the way?*

*What most recently inspired gratitude in you?*

At some point, you may find that the number you thought was wisest is not as promising. For example, you thought after the initial roll that 2 was the best number, but now you have rolled three 4s and

want to go for 4s instead. When this happens, **you may choose to have the traveler take another path; describe some big change in their course, or an event that alters their direction, and follow the new number instead.** Each player may do this once for each set of five dice. Some paths are very straightforward, while others change and change again.

*You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.*

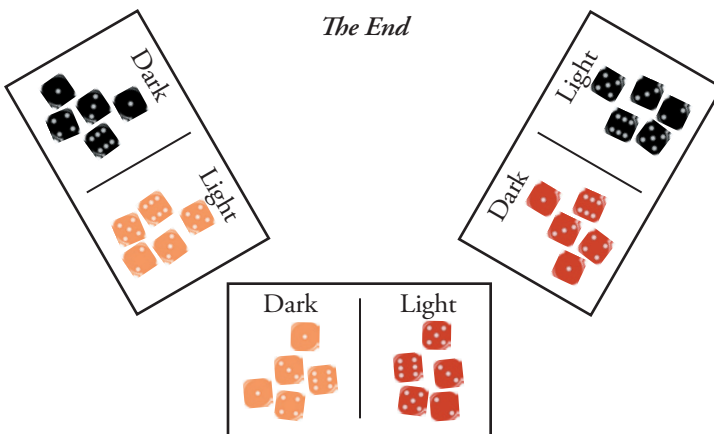
*The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.*

**When the first person reaches the full house (3 of one kind & 2 of another, or else 5 of a kind, on both sets of dice), this portion of the traveler's journey is complete.** That player describes the arrival of the traveler at their destination, the welcome that awaits, and the gladness at the fulfillment of this stage. The player may make a wish for the coming season, giving voice to it or not as they desire. Share some way in which you have made a physical or metaphorical journey this year.

*Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness;*

*For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.*

If the winning player is on your left with half of your original dice, and any of those dice show the secret number that best fit the wish you hold in your heart, this wish is heard by the universe; share some way in which you are filled with gratitude for something in your life.



## Commentary: The Bending of the Bow

While I was writing this game, my oldest son was settling in at college. Leave-taking and travel and new endeavors are all part of the cycle of life. When we start something new, we have a wish, a vision for that undertaking, and the six wish categories at the start seek to capture that impulse. A journey of any kind can be a metaphor, and here the Traveler is not an aspect of the divine, but the human experience of life. We hope for a safe arrival at the journey's end, whether the journey is as simple as a run to the store and back or something as huge as leaving home and setting foot on a new phase of life.

The Dark and Light dice reflect duality, that everything has two sides and nothing exists alone. There is also nuance in all things, what is hard for one may be easy for another, and the path contains all sorts of variation and gradation. We constantly make new beginnings and we are constantly arriving.

The poem is by Khalil Gibran, and is full of meaning, but the two things I wish to point out are these: your children, be they of flesh and blood or ideas and other creations, do not, in the end, stop with you. They go onward and have adventures and influence you cannot fully imagine. And the bow in Archer's hand *is* you, the parent of those ideas or people. Bend with the mighty force of creation, that your children may go far, yet do not break in the process. The duality again, that we must bend but spring back, keeping our own shape and allowing the arrow to go forward. We are also each of us the arrow, launched by the forces that shaped us, that we may go farther than we thought possible, guided by everything that set us on this path. Celebration of beginnings and endings. Journey. Arrival. Letting go. Leave-taking. Light and dark, interwoven.

## Animals of the Autumn Equinox

*Jodi Levine*

It's undeniable now. While the days may still reach into the 80s from time to time, teasing us with a last hoorah of summer, the light and darkness once again in balance. It might not feel like it every day yet, but autumn has arrived. The monarch butterflies are on the move, there are red dragonflies everywhere, and the evening insect chorus has been changing dramatically from even a few weeks ago, waning, chirping a more melancholy tune.

Babies who were born earlier in the year are growing quickly and gaining independence or are already grown and fledged. Some creatures, rabbits and many rodents for example, have now had a second or even a third litter. They don't say "breed like rabbits" for nothing! The only tadpoles left in the ponds now are the bullfrogs, but they'll overwinter halfway through their metamorphosis this first year and finish their changes in the spring.

Look to the trees! A few birds are already starting to gather in flocks, preparing for their long journeys to come. Confused, the occasional tree frog, seeing the balance of the light and dark and thinking it's spring once again, sings an out of season song. The squirrels and raccoons are feasting on the ripening apples, sometimes stripping a whole tree bare of fruit overnight.

Meanwhile, plenty of creatures are here in abundance now and seem here to stay. If we haven't yet had a frost, the gardens and meadows are still full of pollinators. We love them, but we're perhaps not so fond of the fruit flies, house flies and yellow jackets that seem to be everywhere, especially when we bring in our apples and pears and the last of our tomatoes. They want to share the late season harvest, too. Not to worry, though. A killing frost is definitely on its way, bringing an end to this year's mosquitoes and other tiny creatures that test our patience. Meanwhile, we can enjoy the grasshoppers, butterflies and bumblebees, the deer and foxes in the fields and all the other creatures that still share our spaces.

## Our Silent Companions: the Autumn Equinox *Emily Care Boss*

Harvest gives way to autumn's red, orange and gold. The days grow cooler, the animals hurry to gather food to get them through the winter. In New England, depending on the year native white pine and introduced Norway spruce may have branches heavy with long pine cones. On acorn mast years, you'll see the shield-shaped light-brown acorns of red oaks, with their jaunty shallow brown caps like a beret. Or the rounder, smaller nuts of black oaks, with a deep cap, reminiscent of knitted winter hats us humans will soon don.

If we haven't laid in our firewood against that cold, now is the time to split maple, ash, oak to season. Ash which burns green is prized above all others:

*"But ash green or ash brown  
Is fit for a queen with golden crown..."*

(Attributed to Lady Congreve, 1930. *The Times*.)

Fall is a time of returning, and also of moving on. We come back to our homes after flying away for summer vacations. Bells ring youths into academic halls, beckoning them on new paths to discover their place in the world. We wish them all good speed, and lay up this year's harvest to feed ourselves and them on their return.

In this time of change we would do well to appreciate where we are and those around us we may overlook. In the landscape, now is a good time to take stock of plants we often take for granted: the grasses. They feed mice and small rodents their seeds, and providing nesting areas for ground nesting birds like grouse. There are native species whose names you may not know but that you would recognize.

Autumn bentgrass is a showy one: a tall central stem surrounded by thin branches that go out at right angles, small seeds suspended in the air. Little bluestem's stalks turn a rich purple-rust this time of year. Great plains rye, a wild variety, grows with each stem capped by

an ear good for animal forage. See sweetgrass along the riverbanks, topped with bunched seeds, and used for basket weaving. But be alert for invasive grasses, outcompeting natives. You can tell the common reed, *Phragmites australis*, from our native American reed by the color of the stem internodes—dark red for native, dull tan for the exotic species.

## The Autumn Equinox in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

We live in apple country, but we're not the best applers. We have a big old apple tree in our front yard, but it bears only every other year, sometimes prodigiously and sometimes barely at all, and we're just never prepared for the good years. We use as many apples as we can but the rest pile up; maybe one of these years we'll finally get that cider press we've been thinking about.

### Sparkling Cider

Buy a gallon of unpasteurized cider.

Open it.

Take a big swig right out of the jug.

Cap it up again.

Put it on top of the refrigerator.

Wait.

There's a danger that it'll go wrong and the bacteria living in it will beat out the yeast. That's never happened to me, but I guess there's a danger.

What happens instead is that the native yeasts pressed into the cider grow. The alcohol they excrete kills off the bacteria and the CO<sub>2</sub> they exhale carbonates the cider.

You'll know it's working when the jug starts to gently bulge, within a few days. Put your ear to it, you'll hear it quietly buzzing.

Drink some every day. It's a living thing; it changes every day. You can move it into the fridge to slow it down, but you can't stop it! Each glassful is unique, itself, unrepeatable, irreplaceable.



## The Night Sky at the Autumn Equinox

*Epidiah Ravachol*

In early evening in the autumn, if we look to the north we can see a whole dysfunctional family of constellations. Perhaps the easiest among them to spot is Queen Cassiopeia, seen as five stars arranged as either a W or an M depending on the time of night. If we look upon her as a W, and we follow the line made by the rightmost leg of the W and followed it a northerly direction, we would come upon King Cepheus, her husband in the shape of a house with a steep roof. If we follow that line in the opposite direction we come across two more stars in a row that make up the knees of Andromeda, her daughter who she and her husband have chained to a rock in order to save their seaside kingdom.

Andromeda, if Cassiopeia is to be believed, is more beautiful than even the Nereids, the nymph daughters of Poseidon. And Poseidon, never one to let the opportunity for a grudge slip by, sends the sea monster Cetus to destroy the kingdom of Cepheus and Cassiopeia. In an effort to assuage the sea god's anger, the king and queen decide to offer up Andromeda to be sacrificed in the kingdom's stead. The tale gets no better from there as a hero in the form of Perseus shows up to slay Cetus in exchange for an arranged marriage to Andromeda, in some cases using the severed head of the Gorgon Medusa to turn the monster to stone.

Cetus, Perseus, Medusa's head, and even Pegasus, who figures prominently in certain film adaptations of the myth, all appear in the constellations surrounding Andromeda and her family. But the most spectacular sight among them is also perhaps the hardest to see. If you are far enough away from city lights and you look in the field of black between Andromeda and Cassiopeia, you will see a tiny, fuzzy patch of light like a small cloud held stationary in the night sky. It is so faint that it is often easier to see if you don't look directly at it, but just to the side of it.

The patch of light is also called Andromeda and it is the bright center of a galaxy two-and-a-half million light years away from us. An object so far away that what you are witnessing the galaxy as it was during our stone age. And yet, it is one of our closest galactic neighbors.



## Early Winter Among the Beloved Dead

Ten years ago, their numbers began to grow again. It started on a bright clear October day, when all my family was on a mountaintop, flying paper airplanes and eating apple cake to celebrate my oldest son's 9th birthday. My grandfather was dead. A heart attack at 76, fast and clean, just as he'd wanted. It was a moment to mark, and five more followed after, over the next 18 months.

I grew up in graveyards. Many of us in New England do, as they are everywhere, in little towns and the middle of cities and carefully ringed in on back lots of family farms. We create these places of retreat, of quiet, of memory, and then we go there to study and reflect. I learned my ABCs, my numbers, how to sound out unfamiliar names, how to calculate the age of the person memorialized, and how complicated family structures can be, all from wandering in graveyards. I also learned how to climb and leap, to run and hide and jump out at friends. Some people find children playing in a graveyard extremely disrespectful, but I say, let them love the graveyard. Let them find it safe and comfortable, a place that is welcoming and accepting of both pensive slow walking and jubilant laughter. Teach them to respect the fragility of the old round-topped slate stones, to recognize the shifts to the sandstone slabs so worn by rain. Let them discover the elaborate Victorian marble carvings, and don't fuss too much when they jump up on and down from a square granite marker from the past century. Some ghost of life imbues the place where the living pass, and it can be joyful.

We have grown too far from death. These earlier people, they walked with death all the time. Here is a grave of a child no more than two, here is a young person dead in their prime, here is a soldier's grave marked with a metal star, here is a family plot where the parents buried not only the generation before them, but members of the generation after. The end of October, when the leaves are falling and the branches emerge skeletal toward the moon, when the scent of snow is in the air and we know, we know, that we have a long cold winter ahead, this is when we need our beloved dead close. We all live for but a time, the season of our life. We are dead for so much longer! The graves I see so well tended today are sometimes 300 years old. My great grandmother Minoa Baum McKie always said everyone dies twice, once when their body wears out and again when no one remembers them. So wandering in a graveyard, brushing away debris, reading the names and deciphering the dates and epitaphs becomes a way of remembering them, whoever they are, even if they are related to me only by sharing humanity and proximity.

As I write this, I am sitting with the reality that my dear little black ladycat, Periwinkle, has left us. She was here Thursday morning, but she didn't run to meet me when I came home, and she didn't come in that night, and we haven't seen her since. It's late Friday night and I'm sad, grieving what I sense is my newly departed Beloved Dead. Sometimes there is a level of Zen detachment, a realization that life brings sadness but that's no reason not to live and love, so acknowledging it and moving on is the best possible thing. Sometimes there's sadness that looks like we've been told it "should" look, with tears and sobbing and handkerchiefs. Sometimes the sadness is in perspective with the whole of life or the whole of the world, and really, it's only a tiny part of the whole, even if it is a very sharp pain and a deep loss. Sometimes it looks lots of ways, sometimes in rapid succession, and each is a true expression of love and loss. I miss her. She was my furry comfort and steadfast support, even when she was insistent on being let out again. The Periwinkle-shaped hole will never be filled, and I will always remember her.

The cat-shaped hole can be filled pretty easily, though. There are cats that need a home and someone to care for them, like there are stones that need reading and someone to brush away the leaves and remember the person, even if only to say the names. Bring memories to your Beloved Dead, of them and after them. Bring your wishes, dreams, and fears. Bring picnics and laughter as well as quiet reflection and sorrow. Bring joy to your Beloved Dead. Life continues. Live it.



# AT THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT

*a short game of nerves*

For three to five players. You'll need ten six-sided dice for each player. Choose dice of a uniform color and size; a different color for each of you. Black, blue, red, and orange recommended.

*To all the little children:—The happy ones; and sad ones;  
The sober and the silent ones; the boisterous and glad ones;  
The good ones—Yes, the good ones, too; and all the lovely bad ones:*

The sun sinks in the sky, bringing long shadows and a wisp of cool air. In a handful of hours it will be midnight. The veil between the world of the living and the world of the dead is growing thinner with each passing moment. At midnight it will open, and those who are able to stand unshaken before the Beloved Dead will be allowed a boon. You and your friends set out for the graveyard, each eager to meet the Beloved Dead and ask a favor from those who have gone before. If that should be you, ask wisely, for these are your own people and your own wish. Take a moment now to think of your own Beloved Dead, recent or long past, and what you might wish to say to them.

*Little Orphant Annie's come to our house to stay,  
An' wash the cups an' saucers up, an' brush the crumbs away,  
An' shoo the chickens off the porch, an' dust the hearth, an' sweep,  
An' make the fire, an' bake the bread, an' earn her board-an'-keep;  
An' all us other childern, when the supper-things is done,  
We set around the kitchen fire an' has the mostest fun  
A-lis'nin' to the witch-tales 'at Annie tells about,  
An' the Gobble-uns 'at gits you  
Ef you  
Don't  
Watch  
Out!*

To make your wish, you must arrive at midnight in the graveyard undaunted. **On your first turn, roll all of your dice. For each that shows a 5,** describe one thing you are carrying with you on your nighttime walk through the town toward the graves of your Beloved Dead: a light of some kind, a photograph, candy, a note, a warm jacket, a pocketknife, a small backpack or bag, etc. **Set aside any fives you rolled.** If you roll no fives, you are spooked and flee for walls and light and the world of the living. See **Being Spooked**, below. You may sacrifice one thing you carry to avoid fleeing, and instead remain able to press on toward the graveyard again on your next turn.

**On each following turn, roll any dice remaining and set aside the fives.** These are no longer available for rolling. Put them aside face down, so the 2 shows and the 5 is buried.

*Wunst they wuz a little boy wouldn't say his prayers,—  
An' when he went to bed at night, away up-stairs,  
His Mammy heerd him holler, an' his Daddy heerd him bawl,  
An' when they turn't the kivers down, he wuzn't there at all!  
An' they seeked him in the rafter-room, an' cubby-hole, an' press,  
An' seeked him up the chimbley-flue, an' ever'-wheres, I guess;  
But all they ever found wuz thist his pants an' roundabout:—  
An' the Gobble-uns 'll git you  
Ef you  
Don't  
Watch  
Out!*

**Watch for signs along the way, and add details accordingly.** If you roll several signs, choose one you haven't talked about yet, and build on what has been said before.

**Snake Eyes** (two or more ones)—animals, lights in strange places, and things that bite

**Ballerinas** (two twos (or more))—your fellow seekers, costumes, disguises, and things not as they appear

**Little Woods** (two or more threes)—trees, brambles and environmental obstacles

**Squares** (two or more fours)—stone structures, roads, paths and written signs

**Bootlaces** (two or more fives)—grit, remembering good things about your Beloved Dead, strength of purpose

**Box Cars** (two or more sixes)—sounds, vehicles, movement.

*An' one time a little girl 'ud allus laugh an' grin,  
 An' make fun of ever' one, an' all her blood-an'-kin;  
 An' wunst, when they was "company," an' ole folks wuz there,  
 She mocked 'em an' shocked 'em, an' said she didn't care!  
 An' thist as she kicked her heels, an' turn't to run an' hide,  
 They wuz two great big Black Things a-standin' by her side,  
 An' they snatched her through the ceilin' 'fore she knewed what  
 she's about!  
 An' the Gobble-uns 'll git you  
 Ef you  
 Don't  
 Watch  
 Out!*

**Being spooked: If you roll no fives and you have nothing to sacrifice,** you are spooked! Say what spooked you and run for home! On your following turns, roll your remaining dice, look for the clearest sign, and add to the story. **Two or more 5s for you is Jolly Rogers**—the thinning of the veil, the restlessness of the Beloved Dead, their eagerness to communicate with the living, skulls and crossbones. Add a spooky detail!

*An' little Orphant Annie says, when the blaze is blue,  
 An' the lamp-wick sputters, an' the wind goes woo-oo!  
 An' you hear the crickets quit, an' the moon is gray,  
 An' the lightnin'-bugs in dew is all squenched away,—  
 You better mind yer parunts, an' yer teachurs fond an' dear,  
 An' churish them 'at loves you, an' dry the orphant's tear,  
 An' he'p the pore an' needy ones 'at clusters all about,  
 Er the Gobble-uns 'll git you  
 Ef you  
 Don't  
 Watch  
 Out!*

**When there is one player left undaunted, the stroke of midnight arrives!** Each spooked player, describe one final thing about the graveyard as the clock chimes and the Beloved Dead gather around. Undaunted player, address your Beloved Dead and ask for the help you need from those who have passed from life. Do this aloud, and listen for the answer or guidance you receive. It may be quiet or loud, it may be fleeting or persistent, it may be in words or in sensations or impressions. Once you have received the message from your Beloved

Dead, thank them and bid them farewell. Tell your fellow players they are safe, the night is over, and the veil is closed for another year.

### *The End*

## The Turns

**1st turn:** set aside 5s for later, use them to avoid being Spooked.

**Following turns:** bury 5s, choose doubles or more & add a detail.

## The Details



**Snake Eyes**—animals, lights in strange places, things that bite.



**Ballerinas**—your companions, disguises, things not as they appear.



**Little Woods**—trees, brambles, environmental obstacles.



**Squares**—stone structures, roads, paths, written signs.



**Bootlaces**—grit, remembering good things about your Beloved Dead, strength of purpose.



**Box Cars**—sounds, vehicles, movement.

**If you roll no 5s, you are Spooked:** sacrifice a 5 from turn 1, or run for home. Describe what spooks you. On following turns, roll all your dice that were not set aside, buried, or sacrificed when you ran for home. **Two or more 5s for you is Jolly Rogers**—the thinning of the veil, the restlessness of the Beloved Dead, their eagerness to communicate with the living, skulls and crossbones. Add a spooky detail!

## Commentary: At the Stroke of Midnight

This one is full of Halloween, ghosts and goblins. The walk through the graveyard at night is part of hundreds of New England stories, and a rite of passage of sorts. The names for the pairs of dice come from a few different places; games of chance, costumes, and traditional spooky imagery. I also really like the joke about the tu-tus.

This game is also full of the memories we carry with us of all those who have gone before. The things we carry are not things, they are the meanings of things. This walking stick is only wood until it becomes attached to experiences. This photograph of an old man means little until it is identified as my grandfather, and suddenly it becomes precious. It is good to cherish those that have loved you, and to help others in memory of them.

The term “the Beloved Dead” comes down several ways as well, but the primary are these: that we do love those we have lost, and that by calling them collectively the Beloved Dead we put aside some of the more intense aspects of the idea of communication across the bounds of life. Our beloved ancestors stay with us, in the ways we speak or act, the things we think are important, the memory of their voices, and the questions we ask ourselves about the advice they would give us if they could.



## Animals of Early Winter

*Jodi Levine*

It's getting chilly out there and except for the evergreens living up to their name and the tenacious oaks which will hold onto their leaves until spring, the trees are mostly bare. Now we can see the many nests left behind, the birds' young long ago fledged. The squirrels' impressive drays are visible, too, though their young are grown as well. The squirrels, both grey and red, are very busy at this time of year, gathering seeds and nuts to tide them through the long, cold months ahead. They're delightful to watch, with their furry tails held proudly as they run from the walnut tree to the wood pile and back again, over and over, dozens of times each day. Disturb them and they'll loudly scold you, and rightly so. They have work to do.

Many birds are leaving. The hawks have been migrating in droves these past few weeks and only a few stragglers remain, heading off soon to catch up with their friends. The geese are congregating in and near bodies of water and flying in their noisy V formations, some leaving, some arriving and others just here to stay. The warblers and many of the robins are flying south, the blackbirds and grackles gathering in huge flocks and getting ready to depart, the redwings first and the grackles soon to follow. Meanwhile the grosbeaks and purple finches are just arriving, coming to spend the winter here with us.

Mammals, even those that will soon sleep deeply, are not yet hibernating. They're working on their dens, and eating as much as they can to prepare them for the cold. Mushrooms and berries are still plentiful, as well as stone fruits such as apples, and insects are still active so there is plenty to feast on.

Now that much of the vegetation is brown and bare, the killing frost almost certainly having come weeks ago, we can see signs of insects—cocoon, galls and egg sacs, none of which will hatch until spring. Look on warm pavement and you'll see fuzzy woolly bear caterpillars, the young of the plain and drab Isabella moth, crawling and basking in the sun. While the width of their reddish-brown middle band

might not predict the weather as some believe, they're still fun to watch and a perennial delight for children.

If you're near the pond on a sunny, warm day, you might still be lucky enough to see a turtle or snake basking, but they won't be around for long. They'll be spending more and more of their time hidden in the rocks or mud, waiting for more hospitable conditions.

Be careful driving on the road at this time of year! Not only are the squirrels distracted by their foraging and the ever-present opossums too slow to notice and get out of the way in time, but the deer have begun to rut. The does will often leap into the roadway, the bucks in swift pursuit, too preoccupied with their dance to worry about anything so tedious as a car.

For much of our wildlife the next few weeks are their last hurrah as the days grow ever shorter and the cold of the year settles in.

## Our Silent Companions: Early Winter

*Emily Care Boss*

The trees in New England are in their glory now. With October we enter the slow-motion fireworks of our fall foliage, triggered by shorter days and cooler temperatures. Orange and yellow colors of the leaves are there all summer, hidden by summer's green. The reds of staghorn sumac, red maple and sugar maple that round out our northeast foliage rainbow, are created in the leaves only at the end of the summer, but linger to our happiness.

And the leaves as they fall serve many purposes: a mulch to reduce growth of small herbs and shrubs that could compete with trees for nutrients, blanketing their roots as an additional buffering layer against the biting cold of winter and depositing calcium in the soil. Sugar maples are noted for this and "sweeten" or reduces the acidic qualities of the soil beneath their leaves. They shape their surroundings.

As the year comes to a close, circling round to winter's embrace once more, we end the year with Samhain, time when veils are thin between worlds. Time to think on our beloved dead, and let go of those things that no longer serve us as trees lose their leaves. The flowers of the witch hazel bloom after all else, bidding us a fond farewell, as our silent companions sleep beneath the dark and cold of winter. Keeping spring's promise as we hold hope in heart at life's turning.

## Early Winter in the Kitchen

*Vincent Baker*

I love New England, but I'm an adoptive New Englander, a transplant from the West. Out West we have different foods and different traditions. Corn on the cob in August, yes, but no cranberry-orange relish, no real maple syrup, no asparagus. Squash pie, yes, always. Fresh-pressed apple cider from local orchards, too, but we were such Mormon teetotalers that we'd never dream of letting it go fizzy!

My grandparents owned a plot of land in the mountain covered with piñon pines. One Friday every fall my grandpa and my uncles would drive out, stay overnight, and come back on Saturday with their two pickup trucks' beds full of pine cones. It was the grandchildren's job, mine and my cousins', to shuck the nuts from the cones. We worked our fingertips ragged, pitch to the elbows, sticky and fragrant.

A couple of years ago my beautiful sister in Provo sent me a mesh bag full of piñon nuts still in the shell. I'd thought they were a delicacy lost to me, lost like the mountains and the desert sky.

### Pan-roasted Pine Nuts

Heat a skillet over medium heat.

Add piñon nuts in the shell.

Roast, shaking the pan regularly, until you can smell the pine pitch cooking and the first nut pops.

To eat, crack the shell with your teeth and peel out the nut.

Here's a poor New England substitute:

### Oven-roasted Chestnuts

Carve an X in each chestnut.

Roast at 450°f for 30 minutes. Shake the baking sheet to turn them at the 10- and 20-minute marks.

Peel and eat. Sigh. Wish they were piñon nuts.

I know, I know, roasted chestnuts are delicious. Thing is, if you can get them, if you have someone as excellent as my sister who'll send them to you, roasted pine nuts are *even better*.

## The Night Sky in Early Winter

*Epidiah Ravachol*

If, on a late autumn night, we turn eastwards before the dawn, we can see the rising of Leo, recognized by the backwards question mark made by the stars tracing his lustrous mane. This constellation is evidence of humanity's twin obsession with the stars and cats. It is unmistakably a lion in so many different cultures and myths.

But watching it in late autumn, around the middle of November, grants us the chance to see some spectacular evidence of the cosmic clockwork. Every 33 years or so, Comet Tempel–Tuttle passes through the Earth's orbit around the Sun. Not by the Earth's orbit, but through it. Comets are filthy balls of dirt and ice. As they approach the Sun, they warm up and shed material. The shed material trails behind, shimmering in the sunlight, giving comets the tails we associate with them. But the material doesn't disappear with its comet. It remains a stream on the comet's orbit and in the case of Comet Tempel–Tuttle, the stream crosses our path.

Every year, in late autumn, we collide with this stream, and 12 tons of comet refuse burns through our atmosphere in the form of the Leonid meteor shower, so named because from where we stand, the shooting stars seem to originate from the constellation of Leo.

### Orion

Take one last look at Orion in late winter before he hides himself away from the venomous Scorpius. If we look just below the three stars that make up Orion's belt and define his hourglass figure, we see three more stars hanging there like a scabbard. The middle object is not a single star, but the Orion Nebula—a cloud of interstellar gas 24 light years across. Visible to our naked eyes as a somewhat fuzzy star, the nebula is stunningly gorgeous when seen through telescopes. It is a stellar nursery. Massive amounts of the nebula's gas collapses together and heat itself under the intense pressure of its own gravity, igniting into a new star. There are over 700 stars in various stages of formation in the Orion Nebula. Eventually, in a thousand centuries, the nebula will be gone, leaving behind a cluster of relatively young stellar siblings in that corner of the sky.

## Interview with Karen Price of The Self-Rescuing Princess Society

I have long been fascinated by the stories we tell about our environment, and about the importance of each season and the subtle changes that occur throughout them.

I can't say that the "traditional" (read: Euro-centric) stories resonated with me growing up—I didn't understand why snowflakes were the symbol of winter when it rarely snowed in Louisiana. Now that I've lived in several different places where the seasons are so very different, I have a better appreciation for the local stories. Here in California, we are entering the "rainy season" where the colors are vastly different from elsewhere. The deciduous trees are losing their leaves and turning brown, but the grasses are coming back to life. It's a time of grays and greens and browns, where summer is gold and blue and dark green.

I also have a deep appreciation of story-telling and gaming, and especially story-telling games! So, when I learned that Meg's new book combines storytelling and nature, I jumped at the chance to talk with her.

**First of all, can you tell me a little bit about yourself—your work, your passion, your goals.**

**MB:** My basic mission in life, the thing that underlies pretty much everything I do, is to listen to under-heard voices and amplify them. For a dozen years, I facilitated a group for new mothers dealing with postpartum stress/anxiety/depression. I teach sex ed anywhere I can, especially to teenagers, and advocate for them as they discover their orientation and identity. I designed games for social change and the re-knitting of friendship networks among teenage girls in Ethiopia. I am a textile conservation specialist at two different local museums, where I help to uncover and preserve the stories of the past as told by the objects left behind and people that made them, with a specific focus on women, children, people of color, the currently poor, and other non-dominant voices. This extends to my parenting and how

Vincent and I raise our three sons. I tell them my goal is for them to be “C to the 5th”—curious, compassionate, creative, connected and contributing members of their communities. I really do believe that every person has a story worth telling and a story worth hearing.

**I love the idea of being “C to the 5th.” Can you explain a little about what that looks like for your family?**

**MB:** It’s one of three guiding principles I hold for parenting. (The others are best summed up by Kahlil Gibran’s “On Children” and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s “Generation to Generation.”) It’s what I’m raising my children to be in the world, and the attitude I hope they carry with them. There are other words I’d add, like content, centered, and calm, but these five are the base for those.

Word by word, it means that we are big into finding out and exploring things, places, and ideas. We care about people and animals, and feel things deeply. My sons are thoughtful and attentive to each other and their friends, and they work to make their parts of the world a more kind and accepting place. The whole family is highly creative, in several different mediums. We are generally willing to invest in art supplies or building materials or books, because they are the tools of our creative spirit. Being connected means paying attention to the world outside as well as inside, and talking to each other. Taking part, giving back, building bridges, staying involved in our communities matters; we have library cards, we walk where we can, we vote, we support small local businesses and independent global creators.

In short form, C to the 5th means being kind, being open-minded, and making something of what you have.

**I just love that whole explanation so much. And I feel as though I can see that creative, compassionate connected-ness coming through in your games as well, and especially in *Playing Nature’s Year*. What inspired you to create this new game?**

**MB:** My good friend Epidiah Ravachol runs a game bundle every year called The Epimas Bundle, and last year we were sitting around thinking about what each of us wanted to contribute. I was thinking about winter and wonder and games and the idea of light and darkness, and the song “The Holly & The Ivy” came rushing through my head with the whole game attached. I wrote it down almost in one go, and after that I just really loved the idea of making one for each season. I do wish that the rest had arrived as swift and sure as the first!

I live in New England, which is beautiful in every season and has a deep history of storytelling, legends, and folk song. I've been part of various singing groups and dance teams for decades, so those two combined give me a lot to draw from. Add twenty-five years of hiking in every season and it's a pretty fertile pool from which to draw.

**I bought *1001 Nights* a couple of years ago, and have loved reading through it. How similar or different is *Playing Nature's Year* in the game style?**

**MB:** Ooh, good question! The writing style is probably the most similar thing—the “voice” in both is very much a storyteller's voice, with (hopefully) evocative and inspiring turns of phrase. Beyond that, very different. For starters, *1001 Nights* takes a full evening, and the *Playing Nature's Year* games take 15 to 90 minutes each. Following that, you don't ever really create a character in any of *Playing Nature's Year*—you are playing yourself, or a fictionalized version of yourself, or perhaps a flock of birds. The closest you come to creating a character is probably in “The Bending of the Bow,” in which you and the other players create the Traveler, who you then together follow on their journey.

The *Playing Nature's Year* cycle does create the same sort of sensory-rich stories, and you definitely build on what each other player adds, so there's some overlap. It's a much shorter step from *1001 Nights* to *Playing Nature's Year* than it would be from *Psi•Run* to *Playing Nature's Year*, I imagine.

**What is it about story-based games that you love so much?**

**MB:** Storytelling is intrinsic to the human experience, possibly to the mammalian experience. Thousands of years before we had the internet, before we had books, before we had paper, we were telling stories. Writing and playing these sorts of games keeps me connected to a long, long lineage of storytellers, and reminds me of my place within a world wider than the internet. We exist in a web, not just a digital one, but an actual web of connection, heritage, history and possibility. We can use storytelling and storytelling games to more fully explore portions of that web. That fascinates me.

**What do you hope players will take away from each gaming session of *Playing Nature's Year*?**

**MB:** Wonder and surprise! A desire to go outside, a greater sense of awareness of and connection to the world around them. Also, I hope that people play these games with children and old people. Little



children, especially before they enter school, are natural role-players with a wonderful capacity for seeing things in different ways, and old people, especially people twice your own age or more, have so much life experience that everything is a key to a story.

**You mentioned that your inspiration was the New England seasons. The seasons here in California are quite different. Can players in different climate still appreciate *Playing Nature's Year*?**

**MB:** If the seasons are different where you are, and you want to play the summer solstice game in December, go right ahead! If you don't have snow, but want to play "The Holly & The Ivy" with whatever animal might carry with it the returning sun in your area, adapt it! In my wildest dreams, I get a group of folks from around the world to write short seasonal wishing games that match the climate where they are. I'd love to see what friends in New Zealand and Texas, Canada and Oregon, Italy and Alaska etc. would bring to the same constraints I used.

**Yes! I would love to see that as well. It's all part of the stories we tell, right?**

**MB:** Exactly!

## Interview with Brianna Sheldon of Five Or So Questions

I was lucky to get a chance to interview Meguey Baker about her new project, *Playing Nature's Year*.

**Tell me a little bit about *Playing Nature's Year*. What excites you about it?**

**MB:** A couple things really stand out for me. I love the old songs and fairy rhymes and little pieces of folk tales that I grew up with, and felt there were games there that could be as sweet and simple and strange. The first game, "The Holly & the Ivy," came into my head so complete I nearly shouted at Vincent and Eppy to stop talking because I had to write it all down quick right there in the coffee shop. It felt a little like the magic I hoped to capture in the rest of them!

I loved the constraints I used in this cycle: each player always has ten d6 to start but each game has different mechanics; I had six weeks in which to design and write and find art and a song or poem for each game; each game had to do one thing well and be playable in under an hour.

Beyond that, the biggest thing is the idea of playing games with people you don't really usually play games with. I've played some of these games with my little nephews, with folks brand new to gaming, with the parents of kids in my youngest son's class, and I look forward to playing them with my mother-in-law over Thanksgiving.?

**Where did you feel you pulled your most valuable inspiration for these games?**

**MB:** Short answer: the earth and its cycles. Longer answer: I grew up in a household with a deep appreciation for the ways nature connects and contributes to our spiritual, philosophical, emotional and creative well-being. Some of my earliest friends were apple trees I named when I was 3, and played in daily. They were real beings to me, and my mother never made me feel silly or dishonest when I told her what they said and the adventures we had. Instead, she

handed me books of mythology—Norse, Greek, Egyptian, Native American, and Japanese—and read me fairy tales from the Arabian Nights, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Anderson, as well as the Rainbow Fairy Books. This laid the groundwork for a lifetime of fascination with all things deemed “fairy” or “pagan” or “earth-based” in concert with my Unitarian Universalist upbringing and in counterpoint to my grandparent’s fundamentalist Baptist faith. As a young adult, I spent a decade or more being fairly active in local pagan circles, and have pretty much incorporated elements of that sense of awareness of the world around me into my life going forward, even though it’s not the dominant part of my current path.

**What inspired you to use the constraints you did, and how do you think they influenced your design choices?**

**MB:** After the initial game came through so clearly, I was very conscious that the rest needed to be in keeping with the first. I had been playing rather a LOT of *Tenzi*, which is a wonderful and super-fast dice game, and it was the starting point for all the mechanics in the games—how can I use these ten d6 to do something different? I have this roleplaying story-telling wishing game for midsummer, how do ten d6 resolve in this game?

Also, the songs and poems are important to me. All of them except “Chickadee” are ones I knew and loved from childhood, and I think there is an important place in game design to connect back to poems and songs and the ways creative ideas and stories were passed down for thousands of years before the magic of written word. They frame the games, and I hope they give the reader a greater sense of the feeling in the game. The influence of the songs to the games is pretty interwoven. With a few, it was crystal clear what piece I wanted, to the point of licensing “The Garden Song” because the game demanded it. And by the way, licensing music is a nightmare. On one or two of the games, I went looking for a song or poem to match, which is how I came across “Chickadee,” which is a perfect fit.

**Could you share a story of when you playtested these games that you feel exemplified their concepts?**

**MB:** The first time I played “The Holly & The Ivy,” I was surprised by the intensity of my own wish. That was quite a rush, because it told me the design was solid and that everything worked precisely as I intended it to, even for me.

I playtested the third game, “Bless the Seeds,” with my 9 year old son. It’s a game about perseverance and gardening, in which you

talk about work you are doing in your garden. Tovey described the most wonderful seaside garden, with tidal pools and sea glass and sand dunes and a hammock. It was utterly delightful to watch his imagination unfold and to see him respond so enthusiastically to the structure of the game. The very best part though was after the game ended and he ran to tell his older brother all about the game and his garden in great detail. It had clearly captivated him, and that was exactly the outcome I was hoping for.

I did a final playtest of “At the Stroke of Midnight” at Metatopia 2015, and two of my players were moved nearly to the point of tears at the end, where there is a conversation with the Beloved Dead. That was really rewarding, to have the ritual of the game support such willingness of emotion in people I had never played with before.

**Do you find any special challenges when designing games that appeal to people of all ages and experience?**

**MB:** There are a couple things I keep in mind. I tend to avoid terms like “GM”, “PC”, and “NPC” that might look like alphabet soup to non-gamers. I aim to keep the mechanics smooth and interesting but not too fiddly, and I use plain six-sided dice which folks might have already even if they are not gamers. I aim for a game session that runs under an hour if I have kids under 10 in my target audience, and under four hours if I have adults who might play board games or computer games or play or watch physical games (aka sports). I avoid swearing in my game text, because I want folks to feel comfortable handing the book to their kids or their parents. If I don’t know what my reader’s comfort level is with that, I don’t need to mess with it. If you pick up *Apocalypse World*, I’m pretty sure you aren’t going to be put off by more vigorous words, and if you read all the way through *1001 Nights* and have some familiarity with the source material, the art shouldn’t surprise you.

**Finally, what do you hope people get out of playing the games in *Playing Nature’s Year*?**

**MB:** First and foremost, I hope they have fun. After that, I hope they are a bit more aware of the season around them after they play. Finally, I hope they are surprised sometimes by the places the games take them, by their own wishes and fortunes and the stories they create.

**Thanks to Meguey for sharing her thoughts and process!**

## Thanks and Farewell

This game cycle would not have come to be without the love and support of many people, first and foremost Vincent Baker and our sons Sebastian, Elliot, and Tovey. Each of you did a thousand things to shape this, from editing and book design help to playtesting to giving me a lifetime of experiences playing in nature. This book is dedicated to a carefully pressed red maple leaf from a life-changing walk in the early autumn of 1990, a baby pointing at the winter moon with both forefingers, a little boy gazing into a lily pond in spring, and a child's summertime delight in discovering a hidden cave in a new and exciting landscape.

Immediately after them I owe my thanks and gratitude to the folks in my Patreon caravan who have encouraged me throughout this year with patience and kindness and receptivity. These people gave me a few dollars for each game, but far more importantly they gave me faith that these games had meaning, that there were people out there who wanted to read and play this sort of game. Their generosity of spirit was an inspiration, a source of encouragement, and a comfort.  
[www.patreon.com/Meguey](http://www.patreon.com/Meguey)

My great thanks to Jodi Levine, Emily Care Boss, and Epidiah Ravachol for sharing their enthusiasm for the natural world and their particular areas of experience and expertise. I am so lucky to have friends like you. Thanks for being my stretch goals!

Lastly, to all of you who reading these words, thank you. For backing this project on Kickstarter, for buying the book or pdf, and most importantly for playing the games, with me or without me. You are the reason I continue to design games like this. May the seasons of your year and your life change with beauty and wonder, may your burdens be light and your worries be few, and may you always have a little wish ready for whatever chance may bring you.

Until next time, be well.

*“I think what makes these games feel so fresh and different is, oddly enough, how old they feel. It’s like they’ve been with us forever. They’re like the gaming equivalent of a folktale, and I had a lovely time with them.”*

—Jason Cordova, *The Gauntlet*

*“Everything about ‘The Holly and the Ivy’ leads itself to a magical experience—it is a game I want to play as the sun rises, to mirror the great stag’s carrying of the rising sun. It is a game I want to play with people I love, so we can all discuss our maybe-wishes, our possibilities, and what could have been. This is not a role-playing game: it’s the promise of a wish, a promise of magic, a key to something fae and supernatural, and such things do not abide by earthly rules.”*

—Caitlynn Belle, game designer

Here are eight beautiful little original games, evoking our seasonal celebrations and the cycle of New England’s natural year, recalling the oldest games we know and the first games we learn as children: wishing games, fortune telling games, and storytelling games.



*Meguey Baker is an acclaimed independent game designer, the author of 1001 NIGHTS: A GAME OF ENTICING STORIES and PSI\*RUN, and a textile historian and conservationist. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her husband Vincent and their three sons.*

## PLAYING NATURE’S YEAR A CYCLE OF SEASONAL GAMES

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