

POISON

by Bruce McAllister

Golden Gryphon Press will bring out a collection of Bruce McAllister's science fiction stories entitled *The Girl Who Loved Animals and Other Stories* this fall. The author's latest tale, however, is a fantasy. This past summer, he traveled to Italy to revisit, after forty-five years, the world (village, witches, and lizards) of "Poison" and to trace the medieval itinerary of the hero of a fantasy novel—*The Dragons of Como*—that's almost finished.

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In school that day the American boy, whose twelfth birthday was approaching, did just as well as his friends on the Roman history recitation and the spelling test, which included the word *stregheria*—*witchcraft*—which could, if you weren't careful, easily be confused with *straggaria*, an old-fashioned word for *respect*.

After school let out, he and his friends celebrated their good fortune by buying new plastic blowguns at the toy store in the fishing village and spending an hour making dozens of little paper cones with sewing needles taped to their points. Every boy in this country had at least one blowgun—they were cheap and no longer than a ruler—so the American boy had one too.

When the cones were finished, they went back up the hill and there, on the convent wall, not far from his family's *villetta*, hunted the lizards all boys in this country hunted. It wasn't easy hitting them. The bright green lizards weren't big and they moved like lightning, but he and his friends had gotten good at it. To keep things equal, they each stopped at six, leaving the bodies—which made the American boy sad if he looked at them too long—at the foot of the wall, where the convent cats might eat them if they were hungry enough.

The next night, after dinner, the American boy watched as his own cat—which he'd had for a year, slept with every night, and named "Nevis," the Latin word for "snow"—died in his bathtub, making little pig-like sounds until he couldn't stand it any longer and he went outside to the flagstone patio to wait in darkness for the terrible sound to stop. When it finally did, he went back in, saw a strange shadow hovering over the tub, held his breath until it was gone, and then picked his cat up. When the limp but still-warm body made him cry, he let it. His parents were next door at their landlord's,

the Lupis, and wouldn't be back for a while. No one would hear him. No one would say, as his mother sometimes did, "You're too attached to your pets, John. Even your dad thinks so."

He knew who had done it. The three witches who lived in the olive groves that covered the hills around their house always put out poison for cats. If a cat died too suddenly for a doctor to help, and in great pain, everyone knew it was poison and who had put it out. It was what witches did—poisoning animals you loved. Everyone knew this.

Hand shaking, he found a paper bag under the kitchen sink just the right size for the body, put it in gently, twisted the top, and, though it hurt him to do it, left it in the bathtub where no one would notice it during the night. It was his bathroom, and no one would look in his tub until their maid came on Monday. If his parents asked where the cat was, he'd say he didn't know; and when he was finished with what he needed to do, he'd tell them what had happened. Or at least how the cat had died, poisoned by a witch, and how he'd buried it, which would indeed be true by the time he'd finished what he needed to do.

The next morning, as he ate breakfast with his mother and father, he asked, "What do witches do on Sunday?"

"They're not witches," his mother answered. "They're just old women, John, and if they had family—if they lived in town with their families—the entire village would call them *befane*, Christmas witches, and not *streghe*, which is so unkind." His mother was a teacher and was always teaching. She was wrong—they wouldn't be called *befane*—they'd be called *nonne*—*grandmothers*—but she was frustrated that she didn't know the language well enough to teach in this country, so she was always lecturing whenever she could.

"It doesn't matter whether they're witches or not," the boy answered, and, as he did, knew that it had begun and that he could not turn back. *The truth. The courage to speak it. The anger needed for such courage.* To stand before the witch who'd done it and talk to her about what was fair and what wasn't, to make her feel what he felt. And by doing so, free himself from an anger that was like a spell, one that might hold him forever if he did not find her in the olive groves and make her see what she had done.

"You could be more sensitive about the elderly," his mother was saying. "And you don't need to speak to me or your father in that tone of voice, John."

I had no tone, he wanted to say, but knew it would only make her madder and he would have to spend the morning undoing what he had done. He had his own anger now, and anger was a powerful thing. It could make you courageous. It could make people do what you wanted. But it was also a spell—like a song you couldn't get out of your head—and could make you a slave to it. He did not want to be a slave to it, but he did have a right to be angry, didn't he? His cat had died in his bathtub making that terrible sound; and as she'd died he'd stood there, seen the shadow, and watched it happen: The soul of his cat being pulled from its dying body by the ghostly hand of an old woman, the end of her pinky finger missing.

I will know the witch by her hand, he told himself again. *By her little finger....*

* * * *

After breakfast, he went to his bathroom, picked up the bag carefully, and headed out into the great olive grove toward the place where the trees were dead and the witches lived in their stone huts. His friends would have told him not to—that only bad would come of it, “even if you are right to be sad and angry, Gianni”—and the boy was surprised he was doing it. He was supposedly “shy,” wasn't he? This is what people said. Why did it take the death of his cat for him to be brave? And was it really bravery? Or was it simply the need to tell the truth—to stand before the old woman who'd done it and ask her, “Why did you poison my cat?” but also to say, “I would not kill what you love, *Signora*.”

* * * *

He would begin, he decided, with the first stone hut, the one closest to his family's house on the hill. The witch who lived there would have found it easiest to poison his cat, wouldn't she? Whether she had put the poison by her hut or in the olive trees nearer his house wouldn't have mattered. Nevis had never gone far, so the chances she had traveled to the huts of the two witches higher up the hill made no sense. It was the closest witch who'd done it, he was sure. He had never laid eyes on her, but he had heard her in her hut when he and his friends had snuck in close one day, hiding in the little cave on the sunless side of the hill and watching from a distance, hoping to see her and yet afraid to. They never did, but they knew other boys who had.

Her teeth, a boy from the wharf had told them, were so bad you'd get

nightmares if you looked at them. Yes, he'd seen her. Things were crawling in her mouth, and her tongue had made a noise like a viper's hiss. Another boy, Carlo—one who lived near the castle that overlooked the bay—hadn't seen her himself, but his older brothers had, years ago. They'd seen her hut turn green, tremble as if it were alive, even move toward them, just before she'd looked up, seen them and shouted. They'd run, and as they had, they'd felt her green breath touch their backs. Days later they could still feel something crawling on them, and one of the brothers had scratched himself bloody trying to stop the itch.

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When he glimpsed the hut through the trees, he stopped. It was green, yes, but that was because of the lichen. Everything in these groves—tree trunks, walls, and paths—had bright green lichen on it. And something moved, yes, but it was only an olive branch scraping across the hut's thatched roof. The trees here were not as dead as he remembered them. They had leaves. They were very alive. Why he remembered them as dead, he didn't know, unless it was that fear had made it seem so. He was not afraid today, so the trees were alive and the sunlight bright—was that the reason?

There was a vegetable garden he did not remember, and a stone path wandering from the hut's doorway into the grass, where it ended. He began toward it—under the trees, past a green lizard that watched him from a tree trunk, through the grass that reached his bare knees, through sudden yellow wildflowers, to the start of the path, its first flat stone, where he stopped. His heart jumped once in what felt like fear; but the sun was bright, and he clenched the paper bag, feeling his courage.

“*Strega!*” he wanted to shout, because it was true, but instead he said courteously, with only a little anger, “*Signora!*”

No one appeared in the doorway, which seemed small—even for a witch. Now he shouted it:

“*Signora!*”

He rattled the bag just a little. The body was stiff now, and he didn't want to do it; but maybe the old woman, because she was a witch, would hear it and know the reason he was here—even if she wanted to ignore him.

“*Addesso!*” he said, rattling the bag again, wondering how long it took

maggots to grow.

“Voglio parlare con Lei, Signora!” I wish to speak to you!

Had Gian Felice been with him, they would never have come this close. They'd have stayed out under the nearest tree—or the second or third or fourth nearest—and thrown stones at the hut to get her attention, or shouted at her from a very safe distance. But he was too angry for that, and anger could make you feel safe. Gian Felice would have let his fear keep them in the trees, and the witch would know it, and it would give *her* courage—which the boy did not want. Witches had enough as it was.

Besides, he would not be able to see her hand if he stayed in the trees.

* * * *

Something stirred in the darkness just inside the doorway, as he had known it would. *This is what witches do*, he told himself. They stir in the darkness—to scare you.

It was silly, the stirring. “Come out!” he shouted, in her language. “I am here to do business with you. Have the courage to come out, *Signora!*”

Had he really shouted that in her language? Had he really known what words to use? Yes, because he heard himself shouting it again:

“Viene qui! Corraggio, Signora!”

After a moment the stirring spoke. “*Vengo!*” it said, and the shadow stepped outside.

* * * *

“*Che vuoi?*” she asked, annoyed, her teeth indeed terrible. Even at this distance they were little yellow sticks, gaps between them, and how she ate (if she did eat) the boy didn't know. Her hair was long and gray, and she was as hunched as he'd imagined she'd be. But she was wearing black, as most old women in this country did, and this surprised him. The old women who wore black no longer had husbands, he knew. Their men were dead—from war, from heart attacks, from *fegato* problems—so they were widows, and widows wore black. But witches had no husbands. That is what Emilio had said more than once. “Witches never marry. They hate men and

the boys who will become them!” A witch who wore black made no sense.

“I am here because of what it is in this bag,” he said, holding it up, trying to keep his hand from shaking. But it shook, and worse, he was too far from her for his plan to work. He would have to be close enough that with just one step she could take the bag from him—to look inside—and when she did, he would see her hand.

He took a step toward her, stopped, took another, holding the bag out. No matter what he did—no matter how much anger he made himself feel—his hand would not stop shaking. Perhaps it wasn’t fear? Perhaps it was only anger that made it shake?

When he was at last before her, he tried not to look at her teeth, but at her eyes—which were nearly closed, as if afraid of the light. If he stared at her eyes—if he made her feel his anger—perhaps the shaking would stop.

But then he smelled her. It was the smell of old women—old women at the Saturday market in town, old women on the wharf (when they didn’t smell like fish), and also the smell of his own grandmother when he was little, before she died. It was the smell of vinegar—“She uses it on her hair,” his mother had once said. He had loved his grandmother, but there were other smells to this old woman, too, and they were not his grandmother’s.

Her eyes opened a little then and he saw that one was brown and one was green. This did not surprise him. Witches were not like ordinary people. He was wrinkling his nose at her smell, he realized, but before he could stop himself she said:

“Do not come close if my body offends you, *ragazzo*.”

His courage weakened then, and for a moment he could not find his anger.

“I am not here, *Signora*,” he said as quickly as he could, “to discuss smells. I am here about what it is in this bag.”

He thrust it at her. When she did not take it, he held his hand as steady as he could and waited. If he could not see her hand, he would not know.

When she spoke, he wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly.

“You wish to see my hand?” she repeated.

The bag was shaking even more now, but he made himself nod. “Yes, I wish to see your hand.”

She made a sound like a snort, reached out and grabbed the bag. As she did, she shifted her weight to her other leg, which was shorter but just as skinny. For a moment he thought she might fall, and if she did, what would he do then? Should you touch a witch? Should you help her up?

But she didn’t fall. She steadied herself, holding the bag in her hand, and stared at him. He still hadn’t seen her hand, but he had to look away. Her eyes *knew* him—his bedroom, his cat, his parents’ house—and the knowing made him afraid.

“I know what this bag holds, *ragazzo*. I do not need to look inside it. What dies deserves respect. Not to be put in a bag—not to be opened in the sunlight and stared at. Do you not agree?”

“Yes,” the boy said, and then he saw the green lichen that covered, completely covered, the hut—its walls and thatch roof—begin to move. All of it. To wiggle. No, not wiggle, but to crawl, moving towards them slowly now even as the boy stopped breathing. The hut was moving. No—the lichen was.

But it wasn’t lichen. It was—

Lizards.

It wasn’t possible. *Lizards*. Hundreds—maybe thousands—of them. The green lizards that lived in these groves were all here somehow, sunning themselves on the roof and sunlit side of the hut, and now leaving their sunny places to move toward him and the old woman.

They were hers, he realized suddenly.

They were her pets.

They were coming to see what a boy might want with their mistress

And then the movement stopped, and the roof and the sunny side of the hut fell still again. The lizards were waiting, he saw—but for what?

* * * *

It was like a dream, but it wasn't. It was real. She was a witch, after all, and with a witch anything was possible.

"Then why did you put what you loved—and what loved you—in a bag?" she was asking him, holding it but not looking in it.

He made himself find the words he had practiced.

"Because I wanted you to see it."

"Why?"

"Because I was angry."

"Why?"

"Because I knew that someone poisoned her. I saw the hand that did it. I wanted the person to see what she had done."

The old woman did not speak for a moment.

"Like all boys," she said at last with a sigh, "you understand nothing. But here is my hand, *ragazzo*."

Holding the bag, the hand came toward him, stopping so close to his face that he had to step back.

When a lizard crawled suddenly from the old woman's black sleeve, he almost screamed. The old woman snorted again and the lizard scampered down the side of the bag and back up again to her hand.

"*Via!*" she said to it. The creature returned to her sleeve, where three others were peering out now, watching him.

"Is this the hand you saw?"

It was. Two blue veins made a Y, with the end of the pinky finger missing, just as it was in the bathroom.

He nodded.

The old woman said nothing. It was up to him, he knew.

“Why did you want the soul of the animal I loved?” he asked.

When she spoke at last, it was with another sigh.

“It was not the soul of your cat I took,” she said; and though he didn’t want it to, it sounded true, and because it did, his anger left him once more, and with it his courage.

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“I was taking another thing,” she was saying, or at least that is what he heard. Whether she was actually speaking the words—out loud, in the air, in this sunlight—he could not be sure. He did not hear words in her language. He heard his own language and he could not even be sure she was speaking at all—with a throat. “I was taking back,” her voice was saying, “the soul of my *lucertola*—my lizard.”

It did not make sense. His cat was not a lizard. But then he saw it, because she wished him to: *His cat had eaten a lizard, and it had been one of hers. His cat had ventured into the grove too far, come upon her hut and her lizards, and, as cats do, eaten one of them.* It was true, he saw. It was not some lie she wanted him to believe.

She had poisoned his cat because his cat had killed her lizard? She had lost something she had loved, too, and had acted in anger?

He could have said, “Was *poison* the only way?”

But then she would say, “I chased your cat away many times, but she kept coming back, curious, ready to eat more of my lizards if I did not poison her.”

He could say, “Why didn’t you come to my house and tell me? You knew where I lived.”

Then she would say, “You would have wanted a witch in your doorway? You would have believed her? You would not, in anger, have come with your friends to throw rocks at her house?”

Worst of all, she might even say, “I killed what you loved to save what I love,” and what would his answer be then—except the silence of sadness? She was a witch and might be lying—to make him go away—but

it would not feel like a lie, and so he would have no words.

Before he could say anything at all, the old woman—eyes on his, bag in her hand, the four lizards still peeking at him from her sleeve—said, “I know where you live, yes, but I could not have come to you. I cannot leave my house except at dark. But that is not the point of this. The point is that I did not poison your cat.”

Now she was lying. He was sure of it. Witches did lie. They said and did what they needed to do and say to get what they wanted—to trip people up—especially children. They hated the happiness and lives of ordinary people—and “They hate the innocence of children,” Antonio’s mother had told him and his friends at dinner at once—so they did whatever they could to trick you, to hurt you. It had been this way forever. World without end.

“My cat was poisoned,” the boy said.

“Yes,” the old woman answered, “but it was not poison.”

“What?”

“Your cat ate my lizard.”

“So?”

“My lizard was thepoison.”

“I do not understand you.”

“My lizards are not ordinary lizards, and because they are not, they are poison to anything that eats them.”

* * * *

She was playing more tricks now. She was saying whatever she needed to say to make him lose his courage forever. It was like a spell, one that used logic to confuse the mind—to take away confidence. He could feel himself spinning within it, the spell, like a moth in a spider’s cocoon.

He wanted to run, but he couldn’t. He needed the bag back. How could he leave without it?

“You are putting a spell on me,” he said, as if saying it might change it.

“Words have no power,” she answered, “which the listener does not give them.”

This was true. He had thought this himself when his mother, in an anger she would not let go of, used words that made him feel shame. Without her words, he knew, there could be no shame.

“That is true,” he found himself saying, not wanting to but saying it anyway; and when he did, she made a little smile with her mouth. It was both wonderful and horrible. The little sticks showed against the dark hole of her mouth, and the skin of her lips pulled tight, as if on a corpse’s skull, cracking. Little lines of blood appeared in the cracks, but the smile did not give up. It stayed.

If it was a spell that he was feeling, it was not a bad one.

“What are they,” he asked suddenly, “if they are not lizards?”

After another snort, she said:

“They are what is left of the man I loved.”

As he stared at her black dress, the one so many old women in this country wore, he knew that this too was true.

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As if tired out from her smile, she frowned then, but said gently enough:

“Come in.”

This was how the story always went, didn’t it? The witch would get the boy or girl inside her hut, and that would be the end of it. As Perotto had told them once, a witch’s spells are more powerful where she lives—in her own hut—where, like her smell or breath or bony hand, they are a part of her and have her power. She needed to get him inside to do what she wanted to him. Any witch would. The gentleness of her words was a lie, wasn’t it?

“I cannot make you enter,” she said. “I can only invite you.”

This had to be a trick. This kindness; this honesty; this pretending she didn’t have the power, the spells, to *make* him do what she wanted. “A

witch,” Emilio had told them, “will tell you anything she needs to tell you.” Emilio knew because his own uncle had been killed by a witch’s spell during the war. “With a lie she got him to sit beside her on a bench in the old cemetery, telling him she was there to grieve her sister. She touched his hand just once, but it was enough to put it on him. Fifteen days later he died in his bed like a dog!”

She was offering him the bag now. He could leave if he wanted.

“If you will not come in, you should have your cat back, to bury it as you wish, to say a blessing over it because it was something you loved.”

This was not how witches were supposed to talk—such kindness. It was more trickery. It had to be. He would grab the bag and leave before she changed her mind.

But as he took the bag from her, the lizards in her sleeve scampered down her arm and onto his. He jumped and started turn—to run—but she was looking at him with her one brown eye and her one green eye, and the lizards did not feel wrong. They scampered down his arm again, back up, and stopped, watching him. He could not look away. They were green and beautiful and they seemed to like him. If they were a trick, they were not a trick from any story he had ever heard. They were not howling black cats or screeching owls or hissing vipers, the pets witches were known for. They were green and cheerful, and he was sorry he had ever killed the lizards of this country.

As he looked at the ones on his arm, the walls and roof of the hut began moving again like a slow green wave toward them. They flowed like water, down the path, under the old woman’s feet, around them, to his own sandals. For a moment he felt a jerk of fear, but their toes and tails on his bare legs tickled, and he couldn’t stop a smile.

When the wave stopped at last, he was covered with them. His arms and legs and shorts and shirt were green. He itched, yes, but it was fine.

“Come in,” she said again; and walking carefully so as not to knock any of them from him, he followed her into the hut.

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As he stood in the darkness with her, she touched his arm lightly and he didn’t jump. Then she whistled once, as if calling a dog, but it was a witch’s whistle—not just a sound in the air, for ears, but something more. As

she whistled, a green light swirled like fog from her mouth, and the lizards that had followed them in, their tiny faces faintly by the dim light from her mouth, looked up at her from the floor.

She had begun to whisper, too, and it sounded like “*Ricordatelo*”—“*Remember him*”—and the lizards, in the light of the fog, their eyes like green stars, began to move toward the dark center of the room.

Beside him her voice said, “Can you see our bed?”

He could. In the dim green light he could see, in the middle of the floor, what looked like blankets, heavy wool ones, lying on a piece of lumpy canvas. What was inside the canvas he didn’t know. Straw, rags, old clothes—anything to fill it. The bed was on the floor, and, except for blankets, it was empty. He was sure of it. But the lizards were gathering there; and as he looked at the green shadow that was the bed, it began to change. It was empty, yes, but *something* was taking shape there.

The lizards on his arms and legs moved once and fell still. He took a breath.

“This is where we slept when the war was over.”

“Yes,” the boy heard himself say, and a lizard moved from his neck to his ear.

“We lived here because we were poor,” she was saying, though in what language he was not sure. “My husband, whose name was Pagano Lorenzo, picked grapes at Bocca di Magra. That was what he did.”

“Yes,” the boy said again.

“Do you see him?”

“What?”

“Do you see my husband?”

“No....”

“That is because my sister, who lives in Pozzuoli, the village of red doorways, killed him. She did not have a man. Her man, whom she did not really love, died at Monte Cavallo in the war, while mine returned. She hated

me for my fortune and one day asked us to dinner. She made *dateri*, using the darkest clams, and the portion she gave to him was poisoned. It is easy to do if you know *stregheria*, if you are *strega*. You could poison your sister in jealousy—or at least try, witch to witch—but why bother? Why not instead take away what she loved, what you yourself do not have, so that you can watch her grieve forever? Do you see him now, *ragazzo*?”

The boy, who was shaking again, blinked and brushed a lizard’s tail from his eye. He could see that the shadow on the bed was bigger now. He could feel the lizards on his arms and legs leaving him to join the others on the bed, where the shadow was growing.

“|—|...”

“Boys who tell stories about us do not understand. We cannot do *everything*. I could not save my husband. He died on this bed from the poison, the kind used for rats, and he died in great pain. With a spell she blinded his tongue to the taste of it and he ate it all.”

The shadow on the bed was darkening and he could not stop shaking. It was not a ghost he was seeing, but something else.

“I did what I could, *ragazzo*. The lizards of these groves felt for us the affection we felt for them. They had lived with us, and we with them; and so, when my husband died, I gave his soul to them—a piece to each—a thousand pieces....”

The boy was shaking so hard he could barely stand. The shadow on the bed was complete, and the old woman, though her legs and hip hurt her, stepped to the window now to open it. As sunlight fell to the bed, he saw what the lizards had made, the shape they had taken: A man, sleeping peacefully on his stomach, green as lichen in the sunlight, but one that in the night would be as real as a man needed to be for his wife, with her memories, to fall asleep.

She had wanted the piece of him back, that was all. He saw it now. She hadn’t poisoned his cat. The lizard had. The lizard that was a piece of her husband’s poisoned soul.

“I sleep well at night,” the old woman was saying, “because we sleep well when we sleep with what we love. How do you sleep, *ragazzo*?”

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As the boy walked back through the groves to his house, the bag in his hand, he could hear the grass rustling just behind him. How many there were, he did not know. A hundred perhaps, maybe more. He wanted to look, but did not want to scare them away. Even when he reached the steps to his house, he did not look back. He got a shovel from the shed, returned to the nearest trees, and dug a hole where his parents could not see him digging. There he buried the body, saying the blessing as he filled the hole with dirt. He used the Lord's Prayer, of course, because he had used it before when his pets had died; but also because he did not know another. They waited in the grass while he did this. Then he went back to the house, to his room—stepping quietly past the kitchen and his mother's anger, which did not have to be his anymore, he knew—and saw how it would go: He would open his bedroom window just enough that they could enter at will, sunning themselves on the windowsill when they wanted to, coming in when the sun had set. That night—and any night he wished it—he would need only lie down on his bed, whisper "*Remember her*" to the darkness, and wait to feel the tiny feet and tails moving over him as the animal—the one he had slept with every night for a year—took shape beside him, paws tucked neatly under it, body somehow warm, so that he could sleep at last.