

**A**  
**BESTIARY**

**LILY**  
**HOANG**

*A Bestiary*

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## INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time—shh, shh—this is only a fairy tale.

# ARC



## on the RAT RACE

It is not a desire to play games: it is an urge, a yearning, an addiction.

\* \* \*

When I was young, my sister went to prison. I don't know why she went because no one will tell me.

My sister died nearly three years ago.

I stopped asking why before once upon a time began.

I have re-named her my dead sister.

Although born in the year of the monkey, my dead sister was a real rat. I admire that about her. Sometimes I can be a rodent, too.

\* \* \*

My mother and I play games on our electronic devices. It's early, maybe five in the morning, the sun has not yet lifted darkness from the sky, and we're both up and tapping away at our iPads. My mother had stayed up late playing too. I fell asleep after midnight, and she was playing. I woke up to get a sip of water, and she was playing. I got up to go to the bathroom, and she was playing. I woke up, too early, and she was still playing. I wondered then—as now—if she'd slept at all or if the games she played induced a certain desired insomnia, one pressured by compulsion and pleasure. Or maybe she had been excited that I was home visiting and that had kept her awake. Or maybe this was her natural circadian. Or maybe there was something else bothering her, an icy ache.

\* \* \*

My dead sister left behind two sons: one has become healthy, the other a heroin addict—a *recovering* heroin addict.

\* \* \*

B.F. Skinner created the operant conditioning chamber. Rats were taught that pushing a lever would release food. Then, a variety of stimulants were applied, such as electroshock. The purpose of the operant conditioning chamber was to study schedules of reinforcement, discriminative control, delayed response, and punishment.

\* \* \*

Towards the end, my dead sister stopped discriminating: any opiate would do, anything to subside her pain.

\* \* \*

My ex-husband Chris used to tell me I compartmentalize my problems in order to focus on work. This was a criticism, but to me, my abilities to neatly tuck my problems into a liminal space and heave myself into writing and teaching is an admirable trait, one that other people praise. To push one of those compartments away from the shadows and into the uproarious sunlight is to assail me. To point out my difference feels like a massacre of my dignity and my very personhood. The aggressor doesn't recognize my hurt because I work my best not to show it.

\* \* \*

Rats have been used in laboratories since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

\* \* \*

When I was a girl, my parents' Vietnamese friends would say, "Your sister is so beautiful, but at least you are smart."

At her funeral, the Vietnamese community gathers and praises her beauty.

My dead sister was buried in my wedding *áo dài*. Now that I am no longer married, I don't need any trinkets.

\* \* \*

A rat race is a pursuit without end. It is a lab rat rolling in its wheel, sniffing hard for the prize that can only be had when the goal is reached—but the rat is never freed and the race is only over until tomorrow.

At the end of the rat race is a Styrofoam carrot, but doesn't it look delicious?

\* \* \*

David Foster Wallace said, "The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing."

\* \* \*

Once, many years ago, my dead sister achieved the American dream—and then she lost it, destroyed it, abandoned it—as she had with me, too.

But before all that, she met a military man, whom she married. She sold her multi-million dollar construction company, and they lived in a tour of Midwestern two-stories houses. He was a Full Bird Colonel in the Air Force and she felt very alone.

\* \* \*

A group of congregated rats is called a mischief.

\* \* \*

One Thanksgiving many years ago, my dead sister flew my whole family to Colorado Springs. Mason was just a baby then and Justin an angry teen and my parents were proud. She showed my parents her husband's paycheck as proof of her happiness. She smiled and I recognized her misery.

She was still fat with baby weight even though Mason was nearly a year old. For Christmas, her husband gave her diet pills—as a joke, supposedly.

\* \* \*

He was a good man though. He didn't deserve any of it.

\* \* \*

The Rat King is not king of rats.

The Rat King is a monster.

He is the plague. And gross.

\* \* \*

Then, a decade into their marriage, everything busted open—first her lies and addiction, then Mason's paternity was revealed, and finally the fact that she had drained all of their accounts and savings and stocks. She went to rehab to keep her sons, and her husband attempted to forgive her.

She moved back to San Antonio, a failure.

She got a brain aneurysm.

By forty, she had moved back in my parents.

By forty-three, she was dead.

\* \* \*

In those years between losing her American dream life and dying, she seemed genuinely happy. Her long-time lover and Mason's real father loved her immensely, worshipped her. Raul devoted himself to her, and she's always preferred to be spoiled. Her death is tragic because happiness is rare. I was witness to it.

\* \* \*

When my father is up and drinking his coffee, I show him a logic game I think he'd like, 2048. My mother asks me to download it onto her iPad too. Insensitively, I say, "It's a hard game."

My mother says, "I think the games I play are too kid-like."

The games my mother plays are, in fact, made for children. These

are the games she feels most attuned to and prepared for. They approximate what she approximates her own competence to be. Despite her invisible self-confidence, my mother is now a translator for the courts. She travels all over Texas. She is a valued commodity. Her job, albeit part-time, betrays my mother's gentle and cunning intelligence.

I download different games for my mother. This time, I don't rely on Disney princesses or animated animals. I get her a mega-solitaire pack. I find her more challenging games, ones that might retain her interest without being too difficult as to usher in defeat. I curate a gallery of participatory entertainment.

Afterwards, I show my mother how to cut and paste on her iPad. She shakes her head and says, in English, "Ayyyyi, your mom so stupid."

In Vietnamese, I respond, "No, you're not stupid. You just didn't know, that's all."

"Listen to her," my father says.

\* \* \*

In the 1950s, Mao Zedong began the Four Pests campaign to rid China of rats, mosquitos, flies, and sparrows. The sparrows were a particular nuisance and the spotlight of his campaign. Nearly 80,000 scarecrows were built and erected. By decree, citizens were to force sparrows to fly until death by exhaustion. Knocking pots against pans, sparrows fell, and hundreds of millions of sparrows are estimated to have died this way.

But sparrows are useful, as are rats and mosquitos and flies. A nuisance, yes, but functional. And so the Chinese government learned about ecosystems: sparrows eat insects who eat grains and thus began the Great Famine.

\* \* \*

My father says to me in Vietnamese, "Your mother is never home. Now that she's retired, every day she has to go to the store and she has to go do this and she has to go do that." In English, he adds,