

MERRY-GO-TATS: A BESTIARY, A FABLE

I. COCONUT PARK

On its way to high ruinate merry
go round carousel vine draped

imagine the plaster cast plastic
painted animals pole pinned :

turtle lizard cat and dog rooster
goat and cow up and down they

spun round and round where now only palm
frond and grass bend through wood slat

the chain link fence. Admission: from one
childhood a father's stamp

back handed ink smear; from another
a record or 8 track mule

and mongrel tabby and hen on their
way to play in town Bremen.

II. AT THE GALLIWASP HOUR

we drank fresh guava juice
shook off sleep left from naps
the lizards a shifting
pattern wall papering
the plaster when we sat
and ate and spoke of black
space and brown study how
ants roam in patterns scent
highways a rush hour
of sill counter tile
why the cat mews why named
chickens can't be eaten

1. What Addie the Dawg Lost

One dog barks, then two. One
lab barks. Two Rotweilers
listen. Ear prick. Nose sniff.
Body slam the gate. One
Rot barks, then two. Addie
slinks away. Three dogs bark
then four. Echo. Bark. Ark.
Ridge top slope slide carried
yard to yard fence to fence
wave a comin down the hill.
Addie listens circles
nail on tile. Addie
spies through the landing's spires.
Barks next door. Barks across
the street. Mouth open. No
sound. Wave broken message
intercepted. Lie down
cool down pant concrete nap.

2. Croak Croak Gecko

Addie woke to the croak
croak gecko. *Go away.*
"I think I'll stay. You've lost
your bark. You broke the chain."
Tief! Addie growled. *You stole*

my sound. "I stole nothing
dawg. But I'll croak your spot
til you find ya voice." Croak
croak gecko bellowed low.
A woman screamed. A man
fled. "Tis should be fun." Croak
croak belled low again. "Ask
dat deh guzoo cow. She'll
know." He had no choice. "Go."

3. Saw the Guzoo Cow, Heard Her

Addie found the guzoo
cow dining on shadows.
"I know why you've come." Chew
chew cud cud. "But your bark's
not here." *Tief Gecko stole*
it. "By my wise eyes would
de gecko send you here
if he stole your pretty
bark?" Tail swish. Addie scratched
back leg to ear. "Listen
dawg—what the gecko no
stole you can't reclaim." Chew
cud chew. "But what's been lost—
seek the three guava trees
tethered by the thickest
web. When the fruit falls ripe
ask to see Isnana's
mirror and then, you'll hear—"

III. AT THE PEENY WALLY HOUR

under the guava trees
we descended pavers
a canopy of webs
moon slick dark bodies legs
hidden in the glisten
strung above us our tongues
fresh from mint and lemon-
grass we climbed to your room
rain ping pang penged the tin
roof ran down to the cave
where one bubbly susan
woke from the walls to bathe

4. *Isnana's Mirror*

Addie came to the place
where the three guavas grew
and waited for the ripe
fruit to fall. Isnana
himself watched the dog sniff
each trunk base, its fruit, slid
down his web. Addie sniffed
the air. *You who once spun
the ladder to heaven
and so removed man's God
from Man, I beg let me
look upon your fabled
mirror, and he raised one
paw in the air. "Dear dog
a price be paid to gaze
pon my pond. Come, look down
dere." Isnana gathered
his legs. The hound walked down
the terrace. His tongue dripped
spit on the mud cracks. "Bring
back the rain." But how? "Head
first to Cockpit country,
then to Nanny's land. Find
the shell that bears nine spots.
Collect the dew from Fern
Gully and return here."*
Addie lifted his ears

but the mud stayed silent.

5. *Star Apple Cat*

And it was near the time
of year man drank of blood
and ate of flesh which meant
the Star-Apples were ripe
when morning flooded Wood
side that early lemon
light and Addie stumbled
upon a curled up cat
in the spot where a man's
body should have been, green
stickers caught on his ears,
on his head. *Friend cat what
has happened? "These stickers—"*
the cat mrowed. Addie
groomed him, plucked the thorny
balls with his teeth. Slinky
kitty purred through slitted
eyes, his white body, gray
patches like continents,
islands on the blinding
morning sea, free and clean.
*"Thank you friend dog." Your paw
pads are funny, are shaped
like the sliced open star
apple. Who are you? "When
my sister disappeared—
cat-napped perhaps ran off
with her Tom—she left four
newborns. I curled my tail
pulled them to my side—teat-
less I could not feed them
though I tried. For this act
my paw pads changed, became
like stars and now I can
cast a shadow through locked
doors—now on this side now
on that—pass through the wood
slat shutters, perch on tin
roofs at midday. Magic
some say. But I can't catch*

the rats. I have no taste
for flesh anymore. My food's
been cut to encourage
the rodent stalk. Rationed.
Not pulling my weight. Fearful
of the master I left,
fell in this cleft and slept
like a man. Call me Mew."
Well, Mew, you are safe now.
Why not come with me, seek
a way to bring the rain,
fix Isnana's mirror?
"I would like that. I hear
the mirror will show you
what you've lost—what have you
lost that you would service
yourself to Isnana?
I will tell you while we
walk. And Mew and Addie
went west cross the island.

6. The Goat and the Curse of the Alco

Addie and Mew went to
cockpit country but no
Germaican or Maroon
knew of the nine spotted
shell. They went to the Blue
Mountains the hidden
Nanny Town but no spring
or coffee bean could help.
And in Fern Gully's dim
endless twilight they could
but lick the dew. Even
carried in the most make-
shift calabash it would
vanish in sun or moon.
"Isnana has tricked you,"
Mew hissed one day as they
found themselves waylaid. "Stuck
here on the leeward side
land of wood and water—
we will find nothing here."
On Bamboo Avenue

in the copse tunnel straight
out of the Twilight Zone
they met a goat who roamed
roadside all chain leash clink
and peg scrape. "Help! They mean
to eat me, to make me
into jerk!" *Calm friend goat.*
Come with us and help us
on our quest. "What do you
seek for a dog to friend
a cat?" Addie and Mew
told their tales. "Call me Gat.
Can you help with this chain?"
Mew slid his star apple
paws to loosen the chain
from Gat's neck. Addie tugged
it over his horns, tossed
it with a flick of his
jaw. "I think I can help.
There is a place, a bay
called Calabash. Women
there sing and drum but we
must bring them a gift. Chew
down that bamboo
twisted like a shell." Mew
and Addie cut and chewed
through the odd growth. Gat read
the crude etchings of school
children: "Roy was here. Jev
was here. 2002."
Gat took them to Treasure
Beach and there in the warm
water three women stood.
Gat carried the bamboo
shell on his head, bowed, dropped
it in the sand and they
began to drum and call
calabash calabash
beaten bottom blood-pump
calabash calabash
hear it in the foot stomp
The oldest came forward.
"The Arawak had small
dogs which could not bark called
Alco. You have the Curse

of the Alco. This is
Obeah our Myal
cannot heal but you will
find the nine spotted shell
when you least expect it.”
She stepped back and they sang:
calabash calabash
beaten bottom blood-pump
calabash calabash
hear it in the foot stomp
and like a wave they broke
into sea spray, left Gat,
Mew and Addie to fall
asleep on the black sand
to the distant reggae
floating down like a dream.

IV. AT THE CRAC CRAC HOUR

the fragrance of guava
wafted through the louvered
shutters through the webbing
of the mosquito net's
folds and pleats as it fell
from its suspended hoop
around the bed's edges
and we slept spooned and cupped
listening to the flute-
like *ptweek ee ee creak*
ee ee dum da da crac
cracs' metallic *speak speak*

7. Parrot in the Otaheite Tree

One twilight Addie, Mew
and Gat passed a parade,
the funeral women
dressed in black and white hats.
A parrot perched and laughed
in an Otaheite
tree. "They think me the man's
duppy come back. Not safe!
Not safe!" Flap flap flap. *Wait,*
green feathers. We have been
to Cockpit Country, been
to the Blue Mountains, been
to Bamboo Avenue,
Treasure Beach, Negril. Do
you know where we can find
the nine spotted shell? "No,
but me flight might help you
get sight. Me have a friend
at the docks. He can tell
shells from rocks." So the three
followed Gold Bill whose squawk
made Addie's throat itch—how
he longed for a rough ruff,
for a long full moon howl.

8. *Fought the Cock at the Docks*

They returned from country
the Bauxite laden land
traded red hills and red
soil for the city's
red lights, the burnt sugar
cane replaced by diesel
and jerk. They crept aboard
a boat its red yellow
blue carried them across
the harbor motor killed
sailed into view prow tied
to an off shore pier post
swam to the shore city
ruins on the sea floor
below. One rooster crowed
cock a doodle doo. They
found the shack the window
Gold Bill wanted. Addie
climbed upon Gat's back, Mew
upon Addie, Gold Bill
upon Mew and they heard
two roosters crow *rasta*
rasta roo crow cock crow
a bwok a bwok a croo.
A lizard leapt from sill
to leaf then scurried
up the wall. "There he be!"
crawled Gold Bill. A red crest
pecked. Men shouted and bills
rose in the dust. Peck. Claw.
And then *Kinpuppalick!*
the final blow but Red
Crest saw her come among
the men come for the one
who won a Chinese bag
balanced on her head come
for the cock's throat. Gold Bill
screeched. Red Crest did his flip
his signature move. "Stop!"
The Obeah woman
was too slow and soon Red
Crest fled with his new friends

told his tale: "I knew when
 to croon, learned how to flip
 long before the sun rose.
 I'd look through the slats see
 his hips pulled to the bed
 edge watch the mosquito
 coil burn down then squawk
 at the sight of naked
 bodies two cocks in one
 bed like the many cocks
 kept in my yard and brought
 to these docks." They asked
 what he knew if he knew
 of the nine spotted rock.
 "Not rock. Shell." They could not
 sleep on the beach fenced off
 barbed wire, detritus
 from the cruise ships a feast
 just out of reach. Gold Bill
 could fly over and Mew
 slink through; Addie and Gat
 were too large and Red Crest
 could not fly that high so
 took them to a place where
 the river met the sea
 and there by the moonlight
 they watched the nine spotted
 island rise, block the sky.

9. The Waters of the Green Turtle

The shell turned. Two half moons
 reflected the dog, cat
 and goat, parrot and cock.
 *This is the nine spotted
 shell? A turtle? "Who speaks?"*
*We have crossed this island
 many times for the nine
 spotted shell to carry
 the dew from fern gully
 and make the rains return.*
 "Sounds like Isnana's tricks.
 I will tell you my shell
 was a stone an unmoored

anchor too slippery
 for the frog and too rough
 for the rabbit too wet
 for the cat and too slow
for the dragonfly. But
 what kept them from me kept
 them here, together like
 pieces of scorched fabric
thrown to the winds that stitch
 in different patterns
 but make a quilt once more.
And so if you did taste
of fern gully as you
 say you did, return. Go
 to Isnana's mirror
 and do what I tell you.”
And so Addie and crew
 went on the road one last
 time, returned to the space
 between the three guava
trees and followed Nine Spot's
 words. First their pillar: goat,
 dog, cat and cock, parrot
 on top. Gold Bill spoke out
in Nine Spot's voice: “Waters
 you stole return!” And all
 but Addie called and sang.
Their note sent Isnana
careening from his tree.
 They caught him in his web,
 dragged that net to the pool
 edge where Addie spat three
times upon the cracked mud.
 They fixed Isnana's teeth
 on the dry bed, mixed his
 venom with Addie's spit
and behold the basin
 filled, not with falling rain
 but a bubbling spring.
Addie looked within, heard
his bark come down the ridge,
 and carried it back home
 where sneaking up behind
 the croak croak gecko he
let loose his deepest bark.

The gecko was mid croak
and swallowed it whole, throat
bursting with the sudden
choke. And when the wave came
down the slope, glad Addie
listened to the note, raised
his voice and bellowed low
up the scale, held the tone
that shook mangoes and limes
from the sturdy tree limbs
and where each fruit dented
the earth a spring rose up
one for the dog who found
what he lost and one for
the lizard who stole his
throne; one for the cow who
told him of the mirror,
one for the spider who
duped him; one for the cat
who extracted the fanged
venom, one for the goat
who dragged him; one for flips
and spins and the cock's swift
blows, and one for the aped
turtle's voice that struck fear
into the spider's heart.
And one for the turtle,
the nine springs, the nine spots
feeding the sea, the Curse
of the Alco undone.

V. ACKEE TATS

I woke to a full moon. It silvered
the mountain clouds erased

the peeny wally flash in the tree
canopy its light drowned out

the *ptweek eek eek* of the crac cracs inked
my skin with the story's tats

red as the ackee's poison powder.
Trace the map the heads stacked down

my back like the Bremen Town chaps: jowl
howl and ballooned gullet, pooled

pupils and web stretch mirrored on lats,
star apple paws, horn and peg,

plumes locked with red crest, totem pole spine
balanced on the carapace.

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