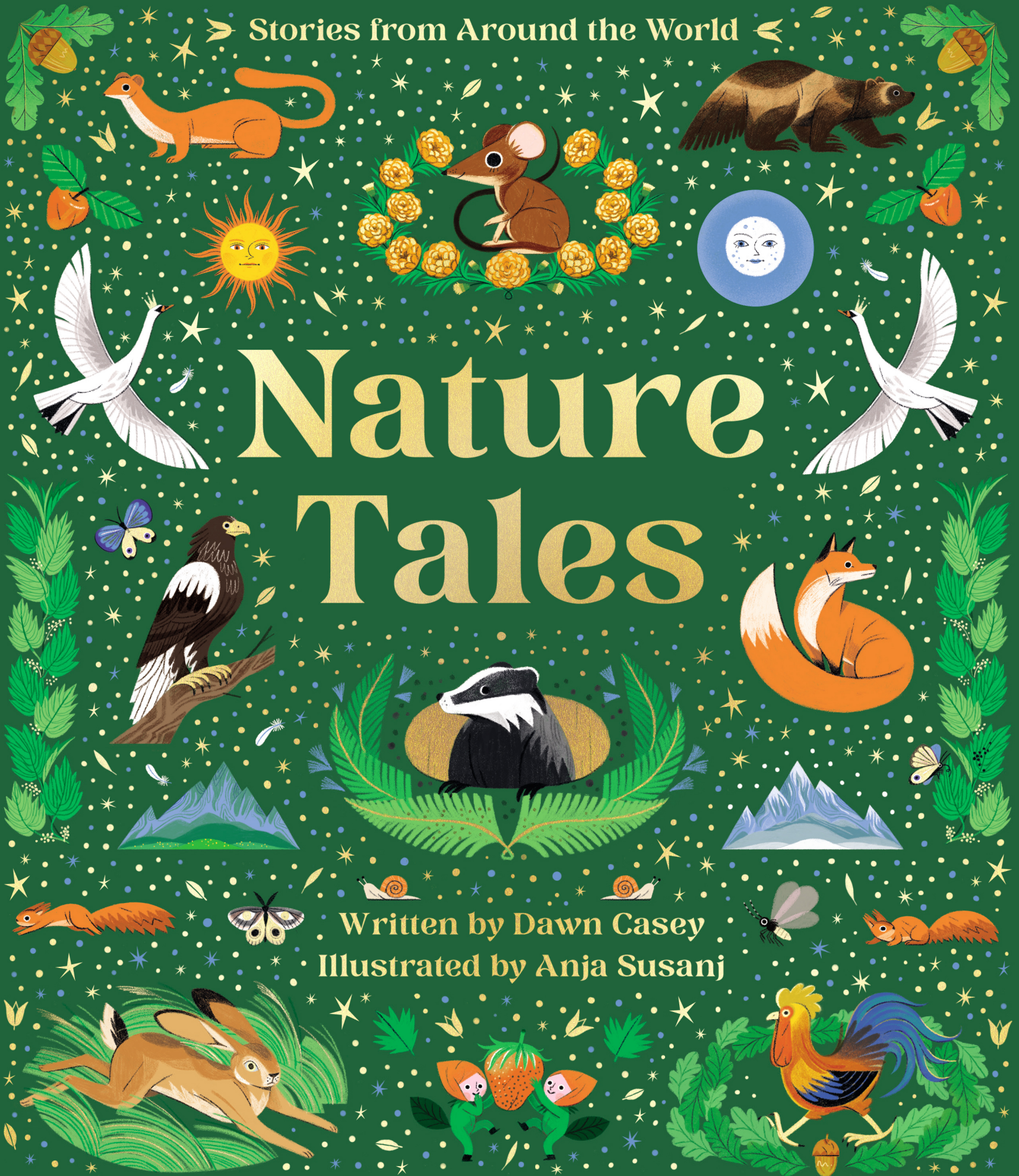


Stories from Around the World

Nature Tales

Written by Dawn Casey
Illustrated by Anja Susanj





The Nettle Queen

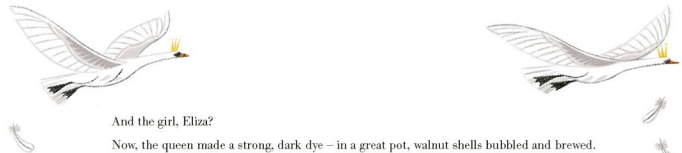
A folktale from Denmark

Nettles grow in great families and give us many gifts: food, medicine, cloth and dye. Nettle leaves are so rich and tender that many creatures love to eat them – the plant uses its sting to make sure that not too many of its leaves get munch'd! Nettle tea is zingy green. Nettle soup helps our bodies and bones grow strong and healthy. People have been using nettle stems to make cloth since Bronze Age times.

Once there was a king who had six sons and one daughter, Eliza. The king loved his family dearly. So, when the king's wife died, he was sunk in grief. But his advisors told him: the country needs a queen! Besides, the children need a mother. So, though his heart had not yet healed, the king married again.

His new queen felt at once the lack of love. Hurt hardened her heart. One day, when the boys woke her with their noise, she snapped. "Get out!" she shouted. "Just go! Fly away!"

Words have power. As she pointed, the boys' skin sprouted feathers. Their arms became wings. Their necks stretched. And they flew; six white swans.



And the girl, Eliza?

Now, the queen made a strong, dark dye – in a great pot, walnut shells bubbled and brewed. She poured the dye into Eliza's bath. It stained her hair and changed her face – she looked so different, even her own father did not know her.

"Who let a stranger in here?" he cried. "Throw her out!"

Eliza fled, into the forest. She wandered the woods, wishing her brothers were with her. But the trees and the plants, the birds and the animals were all with her. She talked to them, as if they were her brothers.

"Hello, Butterfly!"

"Hello, Nettle, may I pick a leaf? Ow!"

The sting made the tips of her fingers tingle. Just then, along came a woman, gathering nettles for soup. She picked a dock leaf for Eliza, to soothe her skin. She showed her the tiny butterfly eggs, sheltered beneath a nettle leaf. She taught her how to pick the very top tips of the plant, which are best to eat. Eliza thanked the woman, and she asked her, "Please... Have you seen six boys – princes?"

The woman shook her head. "No... no princes... But I did see six swans, down on the river."

Eliza followed the river all the way to the sea. But she didn't find her brothers. She did find a white feather, on the shore. She sat on the sand with the feather in her hand. And as the sun began to set, there came a sound – over the pounding of the waves – the singing of wings.

From over the horizon came six wild swans. As they landed, their white feathers fell away. There stood six boys – Eliza's brothers! Then there was hugging and kissing and laughing and crying, and more hugging.

"Every day, when the sun rises, we turn into swans," said her youngest brother. "We only become boys again when the sun sets. We live far off over the ocean, but every day, we fly back, to look for you."

"Now you've found me," said Eliza. "Take me with you!" So Eliza and her brothers gathered supple willow and tough rush, and together they knotted a net.





stout stick – her churning staff – and plunged it, up and down, up and down, into the cream. Not too fast. Not too slow. She sang as she worked.

Come, butter, come.

Come, butter, come.

Inside the churn, the staff went up and down, up and down.

Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!

Now, the fox had a family of cubs back at his den. Four fluffy little cubs, playing leap and pounce, catch and chase, tumble and chew. Stretching and scratching, snuggling and snoozing. When the fox came to the den, the cubs welcomed him with waggy tails and nuzzly noses. But for days, they'd had nothing to eat but worms. They were hungry.

Now, a goat would make a fine meal for four fox cubs. So, up on the hill, the fox stalked the goats. Step slow, tail low... He crept, he crouched, he waited – poised. Then, *LEAP! SNAP!*

Maaaa-a! The goats skittered and scattered this way and that. The fox went twisting and turning after them. The goats ran and ran all the way into the forest – they got well and truly lost. So, the fox did not catch a goat, but out in the woods, he did catch a pigeon, and his cubs ate well that night.

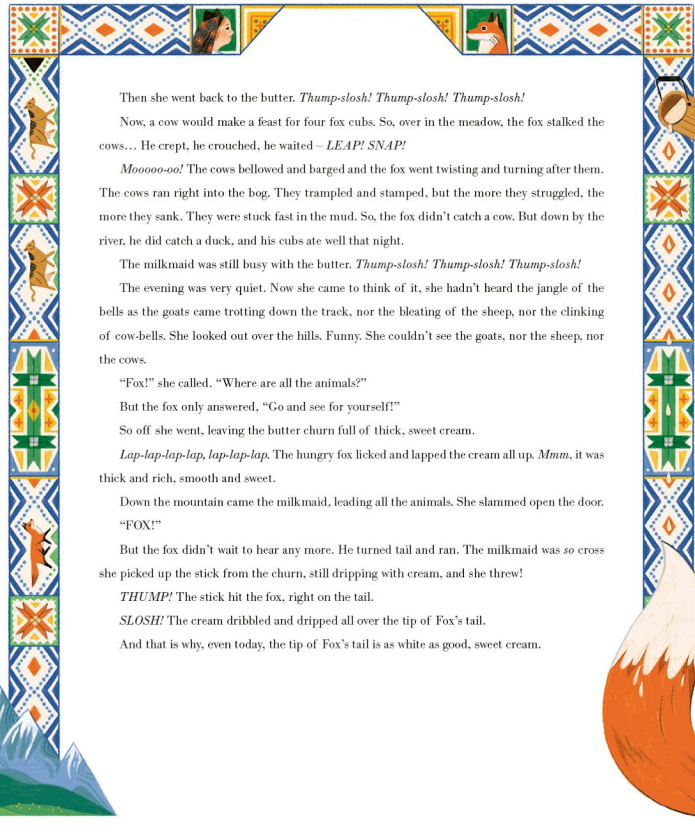
On the second day, the milkmaid was still busy with the butter – she didn't check the goats. She said to the fox, "Take the sheep up to the mountains to graze. But don't let them go on the rocks." Then she went back to the butter. *Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!*

Now, a sheep would make a mighty meal for four fox cubs. So, up on the mountain, the fox stalked the sheep. Step slow, tail low... He crept, he crouched, he waited – *LEAP! SNAP!*

Baaaaa-a! One sheep fled and the rest followed, and the fox went twisting and turning after them. The sheep scrambled right up to the top of the rocks, out onto the high ledges. They couldn't get down again, so they stayed there – *skårfast* – stuck. So, the fox didn't catch a sheep. But up on the mountain, he did catch a rabbit, and his cubs ate well that night.

On the third day, the milkmaid was still busy with the butter – she didn't check the animals.

She said to the fox, "Take the cows over to the meadow to graze. But don't let them go near the bog."



Then she went back to the butter. *Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!*

Now, a cow would make a feast for four fox cubs. So, over in the meadow, the fox stalked the cows... He crept, he crouched, he waited – *LEAP! SNAP!*

Mooooo-oo! The cows bellowed and barged and the fox went twisting and turning after them. The cows ran right into the bog. They trampled and stamped, but the more they struggled, the more they sank. They were stuck fast in the mud. So, the fox didn't catch a cow. But down by the river, he did catch a duck, and his cubs ate well that night.

The milkmaid was still busy with the butter. *Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!*

The evening was very quiet. Now she came to think of it, she hadn't heard the jangle of the bells as the goats came trotting down the track, nor the bleating of the sheep, nor the clinking of cow-bells. She looked out over the hills. Funny. She couldn't see the goats, nor the sheep, nor the cows.

"Fox!" she called. "Where are all the animals?"

But the fox only answered, "Go and see for yourself!"

So off she went, leaving the butter churn full of thick, sweet cream.

Lap-lap-lap-lap, lap-lap-lap. The hungry fox licked and lapped the cream all up. *Mmm*, it was thick and rich, smooth and sweet.

Down the mountain came the milkmaid, leading all the animals. She slammed open the door. "FOX!"

But the fox didn't wait to hear any more. He turned tail and ran. The milkmaid was so cross she picked up the stick from the churn, still dripping with cream, and she threw!

THUMP! The stick hit the fox, right on the tail.

SLOSH! The cream dribbled and dripped all over the tip of Fox's tail.

And that is why, even today, the tip of Fox's tail is as white as good, sweet cream.



Wild Strawberries

A folktale from Britain

In the lazy, hazy days of summertime, wild strawberries grow. They are smaller than their farmyard cousins, and sweeter – a tiny taste of midsummer magic. In the old stories of Britain, the “Little Folk” is a respectful name for the faeries. In these tales, faeries embody the spirits of waters and woods, trees and plants... In this tale, the Little Folk show us how to harvest what we need from the natural world in a respectful way.

Once upon a time, a little girl and a little boy lived with their grandmother in a cottage, down a green lane. Sometimes, they didn't have enough to eat, but they were healthy and well and they loved each other, so they were grateful for what they did have.

By watching the way the old woman lived, the children learnt to treat other people with respect. Not just other humans, but all living beings – trees and plants, birds and animals. The people of the village liked being treated well, and they often gave the children a turnip for the pot, or a cabbage leaf, or a crust of bread.

The family had a little white nanny goat – *Maaaaa-a!* Every day the children took the goat along the lane, to graze. The lane ran along the side of a farmer's field. Now, the farmer had fine

orchards and golden corn and a whole herd of cows. But he counted his cabbages and kept his turnips. He never gave anyone a crust of bread.

Whenever the farmer passed the children's cottage, he always helped himself to a cup of warm goat's milk. But when he saw their grandmother gathering elderflowers in the lane, he said she was a witch. And when he saw the children go past with the goat, he set the dog on them!

“Stay away from my field! That's MY grass!”

So the children had to go further and further to find grass for the goat.

It was midsummer. The breeze carried the scent of wheat, ripening in the sun. The evenings were sweet with honeysuckle. The grass in the lane grew tall and tickly, and the hungry goat could hear it calling to her. One day, she answered. She broke her rope. *Snap!* And she ran off, *trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot*. The children ran after her.

“Come back! Come back!”

But the goat didn't come back. She ran – *trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot* – all the way up the lane – *trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot* – all the way into... the Wood of the Little Folk, the faeries.

Now, everybody knows the Little Folk must be treated with respect.

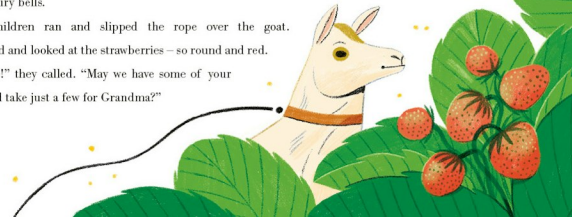
“Please forgive our goat,” called the children. “She doesn't mean any harm – she's just hungry!” The children looked at one another. “Please!” they called. “May we come into your wood? We must get our goat back...”

It was dark in the wood. The wind made the leaves shiver. The children couldn't see the Little Folk, but they could feel them, watching.

There, in a clearing, was the goat, champing and chewing – not grass, but strawberries! The ground was covered with strawberry plants. Each little plant had one, two, three leaves, shiny-green on top and silky-grey below. And swinging from the silver stems were teeny tiny berries, like little fairy bells.

The children ran and slipped the rope over the goat. They looked and looked at the strawberries – so round and red.

“Please!” they called. “May we have some of your berries, and take just a few for Grandma?”





The lamb trotted round and round the bramble bush, and the bramble caught little wisps of wool with its thorns. Soon enough, the bush was covered in tufts of soft, white wool, all neatly carded – combed smooth by the sharp spikes.

“Take plenty of berries,” said the bramble. “They’ll make a good dye.”

“Thank you!” said the girl, and off she went, her basket full of berries and her arms full of fluffy white wool.

“This wool is all ready for spinning,” said the girl. “But who will help me spin it?”

“I will!” said a big brown bird. It was the mother of the little chick! She took the end of a tuft of wool in her beak, and she flew – the wool was pulled, and the girl twisted it into thread. Soon enough, all the wool was spun into yarn.

“Thank you!” called the girl, and off she went on her way, with her basket full of berries and a ball of yarn in her hands. “This yarn is all ready for weaving,” said the girl. “But who will help me weave it?”

“I will!” said the spider. Around and around the spider went. Soon enough, all the yarn was woven into cloth.

“Thank you!” called the girl, and off she went on her way, with her basket full of berries and a roll of fine white cloth under her arm. All the way home to her mother.

“Look!” said the girl. “This cloth is all ready for dyeing. But who will help me dye it?”

The girl’s mother smiled. “I will.”

So, together, the girl and her mother filled a big pot with hot water and black berries. They stirred and simmered and strained. They made a good dark dye. In went the plain white cloth. Soon enough, out came a coloured cloth – as rich as a royal robe.

The girl’s mother laid the cloth on the table. She cut it and pinned it and sewed it. She made the girl a brand-new dress.

The girl was so pleased with her new dress. It kept her warm in wind and rain, sleet and snow. It was soft as a lamb and light as a bird, smooth as silk, and bright as a blackberry.