

The loud music of the festival drew your attention, you began walking through the balloon arch that marked its threshold without considering what it truly meant. Past those balloons, so shiny you could see your reflection, in each of their convex faces you saw a different face reflected; a balloon animal stared back at you. Some were cartoonish and possessed with wicked smiles, others were docile and contented with an enviable bliss you had never known. Your eyes drifted through the myriad of colourful faces until you settled on one you recognized. Though from where, you couldn't say.

It was a black latex balloon, the largest in the arch, but the face reflected was green. Almost toxic in how lurid and bright it was, contrasted by the depth of the inky latex surrounding it. The animal was something you recognized with perfect clarity. A binturong. That intersection of cat and bear, which you loved to look up images and watch videos of as a way of reaching your inner calm. Its expression had the same far-off elation as the ones around it.

"Is that your choice?" A man asked. Too tall and too wide to be human with hot pink skin marked by taut seams, like the ones seen on the edge of a parade balloon. His face was pleasant, he must have been human, he even said as much when you asked him what he was. So it must have been true. Some humans just had swirling, technicoloured vortexes for eyes. That was normal.

"Yes." You said, no hesitation.

"Then you know what to do," the man said, tipping his inflatable hat, making the rubbery shape meant to be his hair sway back and forth in the breeze.

You brought the balloon to your lips. It wasn't tied off, yet it kept its form. Your lips around its neck, you inhaled and brought the air into yourself. You swallowed the green binturong into yourself, then doubled over as the inevitable transformation took place. Your skin's pigment ran from you like ink, until you became black and white, with the scratchy outlines of an unfinished drawing. A void grew in you, you were nothing now, not even human. Despair crept in. You could be erased by the same breeze which made the pink man's hair sway, you knew this. Unless you became something else, something as colourful and immutable as him.

Green, candy shined and toxic, filled you. As it spread from the tips of your fingers and up along your arms, it changed you. Your hands were paws now, clawed approximations of what might become if a binturong had the same proportions as an upright human. Your clothes melted away, replaced by stitched-in patterns of what fur should look like printed on a flat surface. You looked in the mirror provided by the big pink man, his kind smile reaching from ear to ear.

You were a green binturong, a balloon, somewhat sagged by a lack of air.

“Welcome home,” he said. Then he placed his index finger between your newly formed snout, and you felt warmth flood you. As he pointed directly into your face, into your mouth, he flooded you with the air you didn’t know you needed so badly. Pressure filled out your body. You barely had the time to think before the faculty was muted by overwhelming bliss. Your eyes rolled, expression loosening into an idle nirvana. Your body stretched gloriously until it soared above and took to the heavens. You rounded out with air, until you joined the rest of the festival who creaked and squeaked and groaned like the balloons they had become and would remain until the end of time.

The pink man, the ringmaster, laughed boisterously and removed his hand from you. The air remained firmly in place as he floated back down to the ground, eagerly awaiting the next person to cross the balloon arch.