



Bill Carmel, *The Ballad of Andy and Rocky*, Acrylic Mural, 4'x4', June 2020

The narrative that follows evolved as the artist developed the composition of the mural. This is the first mural project for the Artify Orinda, sponsored by the Larmorinda Art Council and Mash Gas Station, Orinda, CA, June 2020.

## **The Ballad of Andy and Rocky**

By Bill Carmel, MFA

### **Prologue**

This is the story of two brave little animals, Andy the Hummer and Rocky the Squirrel, struggling to live amid the human suburban settlements. In the temperate chaparral of the San Francisco Bay Area, wild animals cling to life by their wits and good fortune. Some live in harmony with plants and other animals (pollinators) while others (ravagers) take things. In this little garden of paradise, the pollinators understand that they are made to nurture, to protect, to care for their kind. Cultivated by humans, these gardens provide flowers, fruits, herbs and vegetables all year round, enough for all when the animals take only what they need. It includes the flower of the Bee Balm, *Monarda didyma*, a native North American plant of the mint family with the mythic properties to nurture by healing emotional wounds. It attracts the love and devotion of all who see it and drink the tea made from it.

### **The Ballad of Andy and Rocky**

An immense feeling welled up inside Andy the Hummer at first sight of her. There she was, perched atop the magnificent Pineapple Sage. He flew up to her and couldn't believe she became more beautiful the closer he flew. Hovering just above, bobbing back and forth, he sang at the top of his voice, over and over until she nodded to him. She chirped her name, Anna.

Then he raced high, tore a hole in the sky. No need to look back to see that she watched. When it seemed wings could push air no longer, he lunged back down and just before reaching her perch, he stopped, whipping his tail with a fierce crack that she pretended did not shock her. But not for long. She flew off into the nearby Quince tree where she would nest and raise her brood. Andy watched from a place just above and sang to her from time to time. He warned off the other male Hummers who wanted the garden's sweet nectar. He protected his little piece of paradise.

Paradise for a Hummer is finding a garden with year-round nectar-rich flowers and humans to tend the garden. Andy's garden grows his favorites: Bee Balm, as well as *Salvia elegans*, Penstemon, Verbena, Lavender, Cosmos, Yarrow and many more. Pollinators sing to the plants and rejoice in the seeds that renew the

garden. The generations thrive. Anna took a week to build her nest and a few days later filled it with two precious eggs.

Andy recalled the legends handed down to him from the beginning of time about the invasions, plunder, terror and death ravagers impose. There seemed to be no limit to what they take; when there is something they can eat, they decimate the plant life before the Pollinators harvest the flowers' nectar, before the humans harvest the vegetables and fruits and before the plants can make seeds for the next generation. With their keen sense of smell, their grubby paws, their ability to grab and scourge, ravagers find the gardens and tear apart the plants, especially the newly sprouted, and eat a bite of each fruit or vegetable, discard it and go on the rest. Pinecones are the most plentiful; squirrels horde these pine seeds to feed their brood the following winter. Ravagers make sport out of most any task. Fun and games.

There is a beast, the gray squirrel named Rocky, who lives in the nearby Gray Pine trees. All pollinators fear this ravager. Not only does he pillage the fruits and vegetables, he hunts the eggs and young of the birds and animals that nest in his territory. For some unknown reason he leaves the lizards alone. Andy kept a watchful eye on Rocky. When Andy suspects Rocky is stalking prey, he divebombs the scoundrel, kamikaze style, using his long thin beak like a dagger.

Then the unspeakable horror happened. Was it a day, or was it two days later? Anna's nest with chicks was nowhere to be found. Andy cried out in horror and disbelief, over and over, but Anna never answered. He darted here and there frantically searching and pleading. Finally, he spotted the nest, torn apart -- eggshells and feathers scattered on the ground. Andy blamed the ravager; after all, this is what ravagers do. He set off to find the beast and avenge the murder of his family. Then he saw Rocky running along a high Pine branch. Andy took off like an arrow and nicked Rocky hard enough to knock him off the branch. Down he fell to a branch below; he couldn't hold on and plummeted to the ground. Startled and dazed he caught his breath and scampered at full speed toward another tree. Andy caught up and nailed a squirrel leg with his rapier beak. Rocky skittered around the trunk out of sight and dug into the needles. He hid there and froze. Andy lost him, darting around the garden, up and down the trees. He finally settled into the Quince tree to wait until Rocky surfaced.

Rocky knew that his injury would take time to heal. Meanwhile, Andy patrolled the garden, calling on the other birds, the Finches, the Robins, the Quail, and even the Jays to act as alarms. Finding Rocky took vigilance and patience. It wasn't long before the other birds would shout out the moment Rocky appeared. They knew what Andy's distress calls meant that terrible day. They had seen it before.

Rocky pulled himself up into his nest in the tall Grey Pine, waiting until dark before sneaking out to find his hordes of pine seeds stored for the winter. Gradually his leg healed. He kept watch on the garden, wondering if Andy and the other animals would sleep long enough so he could feast on the now ripe Apricots. For sure, the Mission Fig was too far away to check. Also, it was mating season and he knew this primal feeling would overpower him.

And so it would be for the next few months. If Rocky left his nest during the day the other birds and animals sounded the alarm. Andy divebombed him, giving no quarter. Rocky was lightning-quick as well but began thinking about migrating to another garden. After a few months he would travel as far away as he could see from his perch in the Grey Pine. Over the boundary fences he would wander. That is, until he found another garden, more than a day's travel away, with Bee Balm plants in full bloom. It was in his travels beyond the boundary fences that Rocky found the mentor who helped change Rocky's way of life, but that is a story for another time.

Rocky had noticed how the Hummers and other pollinators favored these flowers. Their complex blooms are a vibrant iridescent red, with a hint of bergamot purple and a beautiful minty sweetness. Elixir from the Heavens. pollinators love this plant so much that they will fight over it and use it to curry favor from those they allow to sip its sublime sweetness. So, Rocky the Squirrel hatched a plan for a truce with Andy the Hummer.

Andy and the other birds had not seen Rocky for many days. Rocky made his way back to the garden in the darkness of the night. He chewed off the blossoming Bee Balm branches and hid them in the nearby mounds of pine needles. Then he returned to his exile to plan his next move. Soon he had it. He cleanly snapped off one of the giant Bee Balm blossoms in that garden and ran at top speed back to where he knew Andy waited to wreak vengeance.

Along the way Rocky dipped the blossom into several ponds so it could drink and stay fresh. Rocky jumped over the border fence of the garden just in time to see Andy still patrolling the Bee Balm patch. Rocky climbed up onto a backyard window box overlooking the garden. He clutched the Bee Balm blossom in his right armpit and paw while waving it in a figure eight pattern to catch Andy's attention. It caught the attention of all the birds at once, and the cacophony of the alarm drew Andy to the window box.

Andy could not believe what he saw. The source of his most profound grief and agony peeked from around the window box. He hovered for an instant, ready to attack. Rocky chirped in his most sincere, apologetic voice how sorry he felt for Andy's loss and displayed the largest Bee Balm blossom ever as a peace offering. The scent of the blossom mesmerized Andy. Never had he seen a Bee Balm blossom so large and beautiful, and filled with the nectar he prized above all.

Andy hovered up and down, side to side suspecting a trick from his nemesis. But Rocky held the blossom and faced Andy while chattering his amends without stopping. Rocky bowed his head and held the blossom steady. Andy took a sip. Rocky placed the blossom on the ledge and scampered back to his nest with the birds watching his every move.

A confused Andy looked at the Monarda blossom and gently licked a glowing fluted red petal. He looked at the Pine tree, then the Quince tree. Over and over. He quietly zipped up to a high branch in the Quince to ponder this turn of events. As he perched, overlooking his sacred garden, a memory appeared in his mind. It must have been from last year, it did not seem recent. He remembered a small gray squirrel, frolicking around the branches of the pine trees, chattering with glee at the fun of it. Beautiful and innocent, it must have been Rocky the kit Squirrel before he learned how to pillage and murder. That memory changed Andy. Mercy replaced the dark thoughts polluting his mind. From that time on, he did not challenge what Rocky was doing, if it looked like he kept his distance from the garden, the Bee Balm and the other birds. And Rocky stopped foraging in Andy's garden and in the fruit trees. He hunted and foraged beyond the border fences.

So that is the story of two avatars, Andy the Hummer, who would overcome oppression and a need for vengeance and Rocky the Squirrel, who triumphs over a family history of pillaging and murder. The two go beyond settling for a truce, and thus releasing them from their ancestral struggles. They learned to live

together in the garden paradise. The Monarda blossoms grew back and there was enough food and water for all. A tenuous peace prevailed. Maybe next year there would be new generations of Hummer chicks and Squirrel kits who would learn the new ways and teach their children in turn.

As they've done since the beginning of time, the humans cultivated the gardens with love, kept the compost going, and provided enough water. Their songs honored the earth, the sky and the waters that give life. All was right with the world.

## Epilogue

As fate would have it, the Monarda played a central part in the story of the American Revolutionary War; how the American colonists achieved a bit of redemption from the bitter cycle of vengeance and oppression at the Boston Tea Party. The Monarda plant was given to the colonists by the Original People as a replacement for the overtaxed English Tea dumped into the waters of Boston Harbor. The Bee Balm flower is given a central position in the mural, *The Ballad of Andy the Hummer and Rocky the Squirrel*, that memorializes this story as an allegory for all struggles against oppression.