bubbling up

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bubbling up

by Pi (Rhea)

Summary

Chihiro after the bathhouse, finding her balance in two worlds.

Notes

I had a lot of feelings I didn't expect reading through Dear Yuletide Author letters about Spirited Away, but I didn't have time to write anything for them during Yuletide season. I'd bookmarked both your prompts and really enjoyed coming back to them, I've used ideas from both of you for springboards, so hopefully this story of a possible future for Chihiro and Haku is something that can bring both of you some out-of-season Yuletide joy.

Time meanders differently in the bathhouse. Chihiro knows this from the moment she sees the leaves piled up on her parents’ car. To her parents it’s a prank, but Chihiro knows the weeks she spent tucked away from the world of humans have changed her. She cannot shake the subtle sense of unease as she climbs over boxes into the back seat. The frustration of their move piled around her no longer seems to pen her in. The pillows and lamps of her childhood are familiar and dear. In this moment, everything is in flux, but Chihiro holds onto the normalcy around her, the thread of belief that in these mundanities there is a way for everything to be somehow set right. Chihiro’s trust is rewarded as they drive away, the brown leaves blowing up and away from their tires dance up into the air to rejoin their trees and flush with the green of high summer. They barrel down from their short cut not to the highway they left, but instead out onto a residential street. Chihiro’s father almost merges into a moving truck and they all brace as he swerves slightly.

“Is that-” Chihiro’s mother starts to ask.
“I guess we won’t beat the moving truck,” Chihiro puts in before her dad can congratulate himself too much on how the short cut obviously worked. She can see disquiet in his face, the uncertainty of how the same path up the mountain brought them back down here. They follow the moving truck more sedately the last few blocks to their new home.

Over the months Chihiro’s parents forget their disquiet, first in the explosion of boxes and unpacking and then fading back into their regular lives. Chihiro does notice that both of her parents start avoiding pork, even though her father used to order extra sausages or bacon on vacations, if the hotel they stayed at served English breakfasts. In fact, Chihiro’s parents travel less and less. Even if they don’t remember, there’s some fundamental relief, a settled happiness both have found in their new home.

Chihiro doesn’t find that. Chihiro makes new friends and a space for herself in her new school and new home, but it’s never quite complete. She feels older than her classmates, like somewhere she gathered a weight of responsibility around her that shapes every action just slightly different from her peers. She goes out shopping with girls she makes friends with in class and does her homework on time and listens patiently as her mother explains a family recipe, but some part of Chihiro is always looking away, out at the world around her searching for the things she sees out of the corners of her eyes. She starts growing plants, a platoon of small green pots taking over her window sill. She works in the garden behind the house as well, turning the earth below her window to create room for new life. Her mother gazes from the kitchen over the back garden and tells Chihiro how beautiful it is. When Chihiro sits in the dirt, some of the new plants curl around her fingers and she can almost hear a voice near her ear, but any words are indecipherable. Chihiro doesn’t turn her head to follow the sound.

Chihiro drops the small sugar-star candies towards the back corner of her closet and scatters them into the darkness under her bed. She leaves them near the stacked boxes in the attic, which now gathering dust, and near where she keeps the gardening supplies her parents have taken to giving her each birthday. She is careful to never do it when her mother or father might see. The candies are always gone within the day. Sometimes, at night Chihiro will wake up to the howl of wind whipping around the house and the flickers of darkness scuttling along the edges of her ceiling. She falls back asleep to the smell of coal smoke.

“Your ideas are so creative,” Chihiro’s teachers say. They enter her writing in competitions, first for the school district and then the prefecture. Chihiro’s parents are pleased and take the whole family out for dinner. Chihiro is certain for a moment that the chef who peers out from the kitchen has the face of a frog. She can’t bring herself to eat until after their waitress comes by and asks about their meal.

“We do so hope you like it,” She says, “We’re happy to have such friendly, familiar faces in our restaurant.” Her fingers leave a frost pattern like a flower where they brush the table next to Chihiro’s wrist as she tops up Chihiro’s already full water glass. Chihiro takes a bite as the waitress leaves. The taste is so familiar that tears well up in Chihiro’s eyes.

“We’ve never been here before, have we?” Chihiro’s father whispers as the waitress moves on. Chihiro’s mother shakes her head.

“Chihiro, Chihiro honey, what’s wrong.”

Chihiro forces a cough, “Nothing, water down the wrong pipe” she says and picks up her glass to take a drink. Her mother smiles fondly and goes back to eating.
Chihiro picks her college because the day they do a campus tour she spots a woman from the third floor window of the math class she’s sitting in on. In three-quarters profile she still recognizes Lin’s face, the quirk to her lips and the brightness of her eyes exactly the same. Chihiro does not stand from her chair and run down to the first floor to burst out onto the walkway and charge after Lin. She imagines it, eyes pinned to the corner of the building Lin disappeared behind. After the class, Chihiro can’t find Lin anywhere, but she’s still certain. Even if Lin had appeared too much the same, unaged, unchanged. Time meanders differently, Chihiro remembers.

Chihiro doesn’t meet Lin the first year, nor the second, but that may be because Chihiro goes abroad. She travels and carries her own special mixes of tea and herb packets everywhere she goes. One mix she drinks, steeping nice a strong for a full ten minutes each morning, and the other she uses when she cleans the bath tub in each place she stays.

“It’s so kind of you to clean,” one of her host mother’s tells her. “I really appreciate it, but it has such a strong smell, are you sure you don’t want to use the other cleaning products?”

“I tried,” Chihiro says, because she had started by trying the chemical spray. “It annoys my nose. If you mind though I could find something else.”

“No, it’s not a problem, I do think it’s grown on me.”

“It always smells a bit like home, to me.” Chihiro admits.

When she comes back to Japan, she visits every shrine near her school covering a section of land defined by the edge of a river on one side and a botanical garden on the other. When she goes to visit her parents briefly she does the same in what she has come to think of as the home of her adolescence. She borrows a bicycle and stops even for the smallest roadside marker until she’s wound out onto dirt roads and up high enough on the mountain that when there are clearings through the trees she is looking out on all the human spaces she knew as a teenager. Though she rides until her legs are exhausted she does not find the station facade, or any manmade structures besides the few shrines, in her search. Chihiro returns to campus and gets a summer job at the botanical garden.

Chihiro sees Lin in the botanical garden the last week of her internship. Lin is wearing a white t-shirt printed with large black sunglasses and bright red lips. Her jeans are tight fitting and leopard spotted, ending at mid calf and her feet have cute silver sandals.

“Lin?” Chihiro says, almost certain. When the woman whirls around, Chihiro feels her face warm with a smile. “Lin!” Lin stares a moment before whooping with laughter and wrapping Chihiro up tight in a hug. Over ramen Lin explains how she waited to leave after Chihiro left, but how she finally decided to go through with it, to see the world.

“Why did you decide to go to college?”

“Well, if I’m going to stay out in this human world. it seems like it would be worth it. I’m not going back to the bathhouse.” Chihiro does not ask after Haku.

They don’t share any classes that fall semester, but they meet up at a teahouse near campus weekly. Lin introduces Chihiro to the group of women she plays mahjong with monthly, and Chihiro invites Lin to join in when a few of the girls on her hall decide to go clubbing together. Chihiro watches Lin laugh under the flashing lights. When she spins the world is a kaleidoscope of colors. Alcohol makes Chihiro’s movements fluid when she falls against Lin, unable to contain her own giggles. Smoke curls up towards the ceiling and Chihiro’s eyes follow it’s curve, reminded of watching from the
airplane the sinuous undulation of rivers racing over land.

When Chihiro goes back to her dorm room it takes her two tries to get the key in the lock. Her single is full of plants. When she closes the door, leaning back against it while her eyes adjust to the darkness of her room, she can almost hear them growing, a soft and friendly hum. She lets her gaze wander the room never pausing on anything she notices. A small radish spirit slips behind a heavy glossy leaf, the odd pulse of a few soot sprites in the corner pause almost guiltily, their blurry outlines stuck to a few sugar stars a piece. They puff darkly and dart deeper into the darkness below a bookshelf.

Chihiro is intentional to make her space welcoming. Sometimes she picks up flat stones from roads near shrines, sometimes she gathers pinecones and tucks them in her clothing drawers. Dried flowers and herbs hang in her windows. There’s a certain feeling to some places, an electrical charge in the air, a scent fresh like running water, the way wind sounds when it’s traveled a long ways. Chihiro’s space has begun to shift ever closer to that feeling. She sleeps deeply under her comforter, the dark like velvet wrapped cross her eyelids and the steam from a massive boiler room drifting through a thin crack in the cinderblock of her wall. Chihiro isn’t surprised then, when her room becomes a way station.

Smaller spirits pop out from beneath her desk and look around curiously before asking Chihiro for directions. She finds that if she listens carefully she always knows what to tell them, so they reach where they need to go. If she places her fingers to the wooden top of the desk she can feel the shape of the door made by the holes for computer cords, she can change the direction the door faces, the location of the place on the other side. Its amazing how much energy can travel through such a tiny space. Chihiro can not fold herself over and over so small to squeeze through the hole in the way her guests do so easily. They blossom or flow out of the hole, occasional banging their heads against the bottom of her desk in the process. There is one afternoon she has to borrow a hammer from a boy down the hall and use the sharp pronged back to pry away at the hole, widening it and splitting the wood into splinters so her guest can trundle its way free. The spirit apologizes profusely and offers Chihiro a string of faceted colored glass beads in apology. Chihiro hangs them in the window and they glow warmly as she makes her guest a calming tea before sending it on. Next year Chihiro will live off campus. She needs more space and she’s running out here.

Chihiro is glad to find she can still move when the school year comes to an end. She has to pay for the desk, but when all her plants and her collection of mugs and illegal electric kettle have been packed up, the room looks just the same as any other. The cinderblock is a vague beige, the bed is a blue plastic coated mattress and the window looks out on the side of another dorm gray and blank. Chihiro shuts the blinds and carefully turns a circle in the center of the room. She doesn’t see anyone or anything left but she says still, “I’m moving, someone else will live in this room. This is my new address.” And she leaves a slip of paper with the apartment number on the desk.

Lin helps Chihiro set up her new apartment. She sniffs at Chihiro’s herbs and frowns at all the plants.

“I know you really liked that botany course, but aren’t you going for a creative writing major? This seems an unnecessary number of plants.”

“I like the way they make the space feel.” Chihiro says. Lin frowns.

Chihiro had never invited Lin to her dorm room. In fact, in the two years she’d lived there, Chihiro had never invited anyone to the room. It’s only now struck her as strange. She has friends she goes out and does things with. She’s joined a English-Japanese language exchange group and a club that takes weekend trips out into the mountains to forage for mushrooms. She’d tried an occult club but found that the combination of a few enthusiasts who loved stories about ghosts and magic but didn’t
truly believe beyond a fond sort of hope, and the few solid believers who planned for ghost hunts on
weekends and spoke of feeling strange powers moving around them wasn’t a fit for her. Chihiro
couldn’t share the perspective of either group. She hasn’t felt that sort of power outside of the
bathhouse. In the month she attended their meetings, she followed everyone to the river at night and
searched with them for otherworldly water creatures or spirits, her flashlight gleaming off the water’s
lazily moving surface. She didn’t see anything. She didn’t feel anything either, when she took of her
shoes and stood with her toes in the water, eyes closed, reaching out for something like feeling for
the place beyond the door in her desk. She only heard the sounds of the other club members talking
quietly and she felt the wind on her dry cheeks.

It takes them only a few hours to unpack Chihiro into her new space.

“Well, it’s certainly yours.” Lin says when she dusts of her hands. “It’s probably a good thing you
live alone.” Chihiro shrugs and smiles. Lin has graduated and she’s only around for a few more days
before she leaves to travel the world.

“You sure you can stay here for a few days then?” Chihiro teases, because Lin’s lease is up and her
backpack, stuffed full of her things rests against the wall by Chihiro’s door.

“You’ve made a good way station. Maybe I’ll use your door for the first leg of my trip.” Chihiro
frowns at the way Lin says ‘door’, like she means something particular rather than just the door to
Chihiro’s apartment.

“But, I don’t have the desk anymore.”

Lin raises one of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows, “You think that was the desk? I’d suggest you
more purposefully pick a place this time. Though if you make it bigger, you’ll get bigger visitors
too.”

Chihiro chews her lip. She tries not to think of anyone specific as she leans her hand against the
wood of the archway between the kitchen and living room. The wood hums under her fingers, hairs
prickling up along her arm and the back of her neck.

“Well, that’s a choice to make. I might get a few more mugs if I were you.”

“You’re not going to take a plane?” Chihiro asks.

“Just because I’m in this human world doesn’t mean I have to completely obey it’s rules. You’ve
figured that out by now.” Chihiro swallows and nods. “Well, should we put the extra futon out for
me in the living room or your room?”

“If anyone else comes through, maybe it’d be easier if you were in my room?” Chihiro offers.

“Great! just like old times!”

And it is, they talk quietly in the dark until Chihiro drifts into sleep. She dreams of sharp paper
shapes sliding over paper screens, a dangerous puppet show and the sound of snoring all around her.
She wakes early on her own and gets up, careful not to disturb Lin, so she can water the plants and
scatter star candy and brew water for tea. Her kitchen is quiet and empty, the living room is lit
warmly with morning light, a rainbow shining through the glass beads hanging in the window. It
feels welcoming but Chihiro is alone.

Once Lin leaves, Chihiro’s guests start to arrive. They come daily. Sometimes they leave gifts,
sometimes they stay to chat and drink tea. More often the step through, nod to Chihiro and step out
again. The larger door seems easier for everyone. Fewer visitors need her help to find their way to
where-ever they’re going next, or perhaps both Chihiro and the door Chihiro keeps open have become more and more attuned to those who travel through. Chihiro has come to be aware of the door almost like another sense. She can tell when someone is about to step through, where they come from and where they might want to go.

Chihiro’s senior portfolio for her capstone is an anthology of stories about other worlds. In each of them a door is featured. The doors are special, connecting times and spaces. They may be between the kitchen of someone’s childhood and the hospital room of their death, or they might lead from one argument to another skipping the resolution and compassion in between. The other worlds are populated by robots and humans and the spirits of trees. Chihiro’s professors no longer praise her originality but they compliment the detail of her work, how real Chihiro can make the otherworldly. They praise the emotion she brings to each story, longing and tension, a sense of waiting, sometimes breathless and sometimes staid, infused in each one. Chihiro revises and revises. She sits with her back resting against the door jam and her laptop on her knees. She reads snippets of her stories to her visitors over tea. She jots notes from tales they share in return onto a pad of paper with a yellow cartoon bumblebee in the upper right corner.

Lin comes through Chihiro’s door two days before Chihiro’s graduation and holds Chihiro’s hand as she presses the ‘send’ button on an email to a literary agent. Chihiro’s parents come up for her graduation too, though she doesn’t tell them about submitting her stories. They only come to visit Chihiro’s apartment briefly.

Chihiro’s mother says, “Well isn’t this lovely. what a cozy home.”

Chihiro’s father sneezes repeatedly and eventually goes to wait in the hall while her mother admires Chihiro’s collection of bells which sit along the kitchen window sill and the tops of bookshelves in the living room. They’re made of ceramic, and stone, and wood, and various different metals. Some are small and round, some have intricately carved handles, others perfect unmarred curves and no decoration. Chihiro hovers, but her mother seems to know better than to try to ring any of them.

One day a young woman comes through the door wearing a familiar uniform. Chihiro blinks speechlessly.

“I don’t know you,” she says.

“Oh,” the young woman ducks a little, “I’m sorry, we haven’t been introduced. I was told you might have an herb mix?” she wrings her hands in her apron slightly. “I’m sorry if I put in the wrong address, I’m not usually the person who goes out to get things you see. Can…can you tell me where I need to go?” Her expression is both embarrassed and hopeful. Chihiro shakes her head and the young woman’s expression falls.

“I mean,” Chihiro corrects, “you’re at the right place, probably. What kind of herb mix?” Chihiro is already pulling out jars from the cupboards mind flipping through all the mixes she’s been able to replicate. But as her visitor describes what she’s looking for, Chihiro’s eyes widen in realization. The request is for a recipe of Chihiro’s own design. Dutifully she combines ingredients from her supplies, pulling down a few sprigs from windows so she can include those drenched in sunlight.

“There.” Chihiro offers the packet to the young woman, “Is this enough?”

“Yes, thank you.” The young woman takes the packet and gives Chihiro a large gold coin. Chihiro laughs so hard she has to sit down. She keeps the coin anyways and tucks it under her pillow. In the next months she has to refresh her supplies first twice and then three times as frequently as usual. She
doesn’t go to the grocery store for three and a half weeks because she’s been given so much food in
exchange for various mixes and remedies. Instead she takes long walks in the sunshine, she sits by
the river, with a book on her knees and doesn’t read a single word, she goes dancing with friends
and practices her English and sends the first few chapters of her novel to her agent.

Chihiro’s parents buy her anthology when it’s eventually published. They text her pictures of them
holding the book with proud smiles. Lin sends a post card. Chihiro goes to an origami class and
wakes up a week later to find her bed full of folded paper frogs. Unlike the sharp, single-sheet paper
birds their edges are dull as they hop over her blankets. Chihiro shoos them away and collapses back
to sleep.

Chihiro keeps the door open, she tutors high schoolers who live in her apartment building for extra
cash and then those who live in her neighborhood when parents send her referrals. She struggles to
finish the novel she’s been working on. Her agent is patient and her parents send her a birthday card
with train tickets to visit them. Chihiro frowns and stares out into the living room from her kitchen. If
she squints she can almost see the space of the door between. Chihiro runs her fingers over every
inch of the wooden arch. Under her hands the hum quiets. Chihiro packs.

Coming home is welcoming and strange. The spaces are so clearly not Chihiro’s. They all feel flat
and empty in a way Chihiro has become unused to. She stretches out her fingers and feels only a
wooden house, only the rough crawl of ivy over a stone wall. The bathroom smells like lemon and
chemical pine. The kitchen has a dusting of coffee grounds left by her father and an orange that’s
gone a little bad on one side. Chihiro goes out to dinner with her parents and smiles widely at the
frog-faced chef.

“This tastes just like that tea you make,” Chihiro’s mother says and Chihiro hides her pleased grin
into her teacup.

“It’s the chef’s very favorite tea, from his personal stash,” the waitress says, “We’re so honored to
have such a renowned guest.”

“She must have read your book!” Chihiro’s mother beams when the waitress has left.

There is someone waiting, sitting on the concrete in front of Chihiro’s apartment when she returns.
Wind whistles down the open walkway, buffeting long hair swept back in a ponytail. His face is
nestled against his knees and he might be asleep. Chihiro comes up the last few steps to her floor and
lets the wind blow her towards her door. She’s almost certain, but she still hesitates one long moment
before reaching down to gently nudge his shoulder. His head snaps up, green eyes searching her
face.

“Chihiro.” He surges to his feet and Chihiro takes an involuntary step back. Unlike Lin he is older, a
man’s face and a man’s height.

“I’ll…let us in. If you move?” Chihiro says. Haku steps quickly aside and she fumbles with her keys.
Her apartment is dark beyond the door. Chihiro feels instantly more comfortable crossing the
threshold. She turns back when Haku shuts the door. Her heart is thundering in her ears.

“Haku.” Chihiro says. Her voice is so quiet as it fills all the dark space around them. The entryway
isn’t very wide, slowly Chihiro reaches out across the space between them. Haku collects her against
him, his arms solid and real around her shoulders. Chihiro buries her face against his shoulder. She
breathe in moss and worn rocks and clean water frothing like the thunder of her blood. When she leans back, Chihiro tilts her chin up the inch necessary to meet Haku’s eyes. They gleam green even in the dark.

“Can I kiss you?” Chihiro asks. The question does not contain every night Chihiro’s imagined this, all the futures Chihiro has dreamed, but silence before his answer is heavy with them.

“Yes.” Haku says.

Haku eats sparingly. He wakes early and makes Chihiro breakfasts of fish and rice. He keeps Chihiro’s space neat, though he brings his own collections of things: worn pieces of sea glass, heavy rounded rocks he uses to prop open doors, and luminous fish scales all find their homes in Chihiro’s apartment. In summer he is a cool curve beside her, his pulse burbling under her ear, but Chihiro stacks up more and more blankets as the fall grows cold. Chihiro goes to her tutoring sessions and her volunteer position at the botanical garden. She goes out to cafes to work on her novel without distractions and works to not let absent thoughts of the pale lines of Haku’s smooth chest and arms obstruct her work. Chihiro would have thought that Haku’s presence in her life might halt the familiar wandering of her mind, but instead it intensifies with a concrete promise waiting for her at the end of the day. Haku kisses her against the sink, before his lips and tongue trace their way down her neck while Chihiro clutches the counter. When Haku joins her in the bath, the cool of his skin lowers the temperature of the water noticeably. His fingers work quickly to distract Chihiro, raising heat across her skin and within her even in tepid water. Chihiro holds him close at night as he falls asleep and thinks about how she hasn’t asked him about his river. She hasn’t asked him how he came to end his contract, hasn’t asked him how he found her.

Haku hasn’t found what he wants to do, he tells Chihiro over tea. Chihiro nods. She’s still not quite certain herself. She’s written past her last block and her novel is almost finished. Her agent is still pleased, but more and more she finds gratification in her herb mixes, collecting and combining and growing. Chihiro folds another crane and blows it towards the flock hovering by a small tree in the living room.

“You don’t have to know,” she says, watching the swirl of colorful birds.

“I know I want to be here,” Haku says. He reaches across the table to take up Chihiro’s hand. “As soon as I left, I worked to find you.” Haku quirks a grin, “it wasn’t hard.”

“I’m glad.” Chihiro smiles back and squeezes his hand. Still holding his hand, Chihiro rises from her chair, using their linked fingers to pull Haku towards her. She threads her hands up into his unbound hair, loving how it falls around her as he leans just that bit forward to meet her kiss. His hands cup at the base of her spine and tingle cool sensation against her skin when they skim up under her shirt. A loud croaking sounds breaks them apart.

Chihiro steps away, tugging at her shirt and turning her attention to the stork-like spirit ing hovering in the doorway.

“Is this a bad time?” the stork asks.

“Ah-”

“Yes.” Haku says. His smile shows sharp teeth.

The stork bobs, murmuring “Excuse me” and ducking back through the door.
“We could have-” Chihiro starts.

“But I don’t want to.” Haku answers, stepping backwards towards their bedroom.

Chihiro grins. “Well if that’s how it is.”

“It is,” Haku says. Chihiro runs past him, jostling him in the corridor as he hurries to catch up until they’re tumbling down together onto their bed. His hair is dense between her fingers, his eyes hot on her face. The ripples of muscle across his back are at once smooth and human and strong, but the energy there feels like rough scales and cool water beneath her finger tips, a double impression that lays all of him bare before her. Chihiro kisses his collar bone and the curve of his shoulder. His fingers walk down her spine before pulling her flush against him. Chihiro smiles against his lips.

“I’m glad you found me,” she says. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad you wanted to be found,” he responds. Chihiro hears the rush of water around them, feels the softness of her sheets against her back grounding her and the the curtain of Haku’s hair falling around her creating a space created just for them held between them in the scant space of a few breaths. Chihiro feels the air between them like raw power, something she could sink her fingers into and wind up into plants through a well tilled soil or arc into every opening in her home and reach thousand doorways and a thousand worlds. Instead Chihiro leans up and kisses him.

Chihiro has her own house. Her name is on the deed and on the mortgage but she does not live alone. When they come to visit, her mother says Haku is sweet, a polite and thoughtful young man. Her father nods in approval when Haku makes them all dinner without any pork. Chihiro’s home has a wealth of plants, a room full of herbs, and a sprawling garden out back. It has a wide ranging collection of mugs suitable for hands of all shapes and sizes. It has a collection of bells that Haku rings on the full moon and holidays. They have visitors almost every day. Chihiro mixes their herbs and helps them find their ways. Haku lends a thoughtful ear and tells stories. There are three books with Chihiro’s name on their bookshelves, fewer than she’d expected but she’s not unhappy about it.

Haku looks up from the small duckbilled spirit he’s entertaining to catch Chihiro’s eye with a sly grin. She ducks her head down over her work so no one else will see her quiet laughter. The duck-billed spirit shivers as Haku’s tale takes a gruesome twist. Chihiro lets him finish, the duck-billed spirit is pleased both with the story and with Chihiro’s herbs, though it’s feathers are still a bit fluffed in fear.

“What they say is true” it squeaks, “this is the best station to visit.” Chihiro and Haku share a look before she turns to wave goodbye to the spirit.

“I suppose this is the nice thing about having a house.” Haku says. Chihiro’s doorway has it’s own room now, with comfortable chairs and interesting trinkets to look at. There are small trees to perch on, more plants and a small indoor fountain completing the space. Beyond the far doorway to the rest of their home no sound from the station room can be heard. Chihiro has noticed that time in the station room has started to meander. Perhaps this is what happens when a person sets down roots. In the last year, a spring has burbled up towards the back of their yard. The new stream it feeds has twined under their fence and now runs it’s way down to the local river. Chihiro has heard their neighbors complain about the new water, but it’s clearly there to stay. When Chihiro and Haku offered to guide the stream with river rocks so it could be more controlled in it’s route several of their neighbors had helped with the project. Since then, the community pride in their small stream has been growing. Now there are flowers that grow along it’s banks and the toddlers three doors down play in the stream while their parents watch.

“It’s not fully established yet.” Haku says, as they walk along the stream the block or so to the river.
He flexes his fingers. “But I can feel it.” The empty river was one of the reasons they chose this house. The more connected the stream grows to the river the less Haku eats. Chihiro worries at first, she is terrified the first time Haku disappears on a full moon. He comes back in the wee hours of the morning, naked and dripping water, limned in moonlight when Chihiro startles awake. She’s so happy and relieved to see him she gets her nightdress completely soaked holding him close.

Chihiro joins a local “friends of the river” group and helps with efforts to keep it free of trash. They lead walks along the river bank with ecology classes from a local school and take groups of kids out fishing and frog hunting. Haku loves helping the children pick their careful way across the river at the shallowest point, his long dark hair gleaming almost like the water in the sun.

Chihiro has a home, a husband, a river and a garden. Her house is lively with guests, visitors, and friends. Sometimes still she and Haku leave. The house slumbers when they’re gone. Haku takes Chihiro to places he remembers from his own childhood and places he’s always wanted to go. They take an ocean cruise that’s populated almost entirely by spirits, they visit Lin in the places her travels have led her. But wherever they go, Chihiro can always sense her tether to her door, the roots set down in her home. Haku can always sense his river and the cheery snake of water from the back of their yard feeding into the breadth of clean clear water where his full power rests. Somehow, Chihiro has found that which was missing when she first came back from the bathhouse. She thinks perhaps it was a balance between both worlds that open to her senses. But she’s also sure it’s having Haku at her side when they return home.

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