

POND MAN OPENS A DOOR



MARTHA A. HOOD

PRAISE FOR *THE VALLEY AND THE HILL*

Magic meets murder mystery in a sequel as engaging as its predecessor, and once again takes the reader inside a web of toxic but fascinating relationships, set against the gentrification of a beloved community. Those who live in Valletown long enough, regardless of their social stratum, develop Senses—but are these powers advantageous (imagine what they can do for sex!), or do they make life more complicated? A saga of disillusion and change, and an ode to small-town nostalgia.

— F. J. Bergmann, poet, editor of *Star*Line*, winner of multiple speculative poetry awards

**PRAISE FOR *THE MIASMA IS NOT FOR US TO SAY*
(COMPANION STORY TO *THE VALLEY AND THE HILL*)**

An innovative take on a classic tale, *Miasma* examines the practical side of having an eldritch monster haunting your small town. Stephen King fans will enjoy finding the answer to the question: what if the only thing standing between you and Armageddon was the city council?

— Justin Robinson, author of the acclaimed neo-noir monster series *City of Devils*

A rollicking saga of horror meeting the quotidian, and my first encounter with a dead cat lady! Paranormal high jinks are set against down-to-earth efforts to manage quarrelsome neighbors and city government in a small coastal town. Hilarious and wistful, the book engages with the petty and destructive aspects of mundane human nature, as the miasma reaches out from beyond the grave to...run for political office? Which could give new meaning to “Foggy Bottom.”

— F. J. Bergmann, poet, editor of *Star*Line*, winner of multiple speculative poetry awards

POND MAN OPENS A DOOR

BY MARTHA A. HOOD



First edition published 2025
by Candlemark & Gleam

Copyright © 2025 by Martha A. Hood

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976,
no part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Please respect authors' rights; don't pirate!

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either
are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead,
is entirely coincidental.

For information, address
Candlemark & Gleam LLC,
2523 Solstice Trl, Chapel Hill, NC 27516
mes@candlemarkandgleam.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
In Progress

eISBN: 978-1-952456-26-8

Cover art by Alan C. Caum
Cover photo from Unsplash
Book design and composition by Athena Andreadis

Editor: Athena Andreadis

www.candlemarkandgleam.com

This work is dedicated to pollinators everywhere.
Especially honeybees.

CHAPTER ONE

I woke up at that horrible time of night that was like no time at all—too late to be called night, and an eternity from anything you could call morning. Hazel snored softly beside me. Not for the first time, I resented the soft, sandpapery discordance and heedless serenity of my wife's slumber.

I slipped out of bed and shrugged on a cardigan over my nightdress. I snatched my shoes from beside the bed and carried them out to the living room, where I slipped them on, and unlocked the French doors that led into the back yard. This had become a common routine.

Outside was cool but not cold this late in June. Initial silence was broken by the downshifting of a long-haul truck straining up a freeway incline two miles away. The waning moon lagged in the east, losing its monthly race to the oncoming sun. The landscape lighting had been off for hours of course, and my salvia and my roses were little more than dark blotches against our hedge. Beyond the hedge were dark blobs of our neighbors' plantings. The neighborhood common area's landscaping dotted the horizon.

I walked to the far end of the deck, the corner of our property. To the northwest, a row of Canary Island pines was silhouetted against the twinkling city lights. Just below on this side, the neighbor's yard was obscured by the canopy of a Japanese black pine. It was nice, the tree giving them—and us—privacy.

The yard below us to the southwest, in contrast, bugged the crap out of me. In fairness, it wasn't all Marinka's fault. In the first place, the pad her house rested on was set higher than it should be—it was just the way the development was graded half a century ago. I simply saw more of her property than I wanted to. It hadn't seemed a big deal when Hazel and I had bought the house five years ago; but with every passing year, it bugged me more.

Marinka had a good-sized property, the largest in the neighborhood. Most of her back yard

was taken up by lawn, a pool, and the pool deck. A curving border of roses and small lavender shrubs lined the perimeter fence. The repeating pattern of one rose, two lavender, one rose, two lavender was boring. And she had severely underplanted. Gardeners came every week, mowing and blowing and lofting dust into the air. Every time I looked at it, I couldn't help but think all the things I would do with a yard like that.

Like I say, it hadn't seemed a big deal when we bought the place. Hazel had liked the view, and our yard, while not terribly large, had seemed more than adequate at the time, especially considering the condo we had moved from, where we had no outside space at all.

I'm not sure when, exactly, the insomnia started. As Hazel always said, you can't solve problems at three o'clock in the morning. I knew that. Nonetheless, with increasing frequency I would find myself out here, staring down into Marinka's yard.

There wasn't even a problem here to be solved. It was just life, just the reality of living here. We couldn't have trees in the back, because of homeowner board view-protection restrictions. Marinka, on the other hand, could have a small grove down there if she wanted. Well, maybe not quite. But she could certainly have a lovely, shady oak, or maybe a maple that would turn a brilliant color in the autumn.

It'd gotten to be a running joke between Hazel and me. I'd once told Hazel, jokingly, that I wished I could annex the property—just raze Marinka's house and plant a whole bunch of trees. Hazel had laughed, but had then brought up laws in our state concerning adverse possession. "She hardly ever goes out there, Thalia," Hazel said. "All you have to do is camp out by her pool for a while and pay her property taxes for five years. Then it's all yours."

"If I start camping out by her pool, she'll have questions."

"That's the thing. It can't be a secret. She has to know you're doing it and be okay with it."

So it was just a stupid joke. And yet, while my wife now slept soundly inside, I was out here, staring down into Marinka's yard, with the idea of taking over her property gripping me in a way I couldn't shake.

It was true Marinka was hardly ever out there. I'd never seen anyone use the pool. I had never seen the large expanse of grass used by either child or dog. Hazel always said I needed to learn to let go. It didn't matter how right I was or how wrong they were. People got to do what they wanted, and those people included Marinka.

A scent, earthy and humid, but also with hints of citrus and ginger, crept up the slope. I

couldn't place it. It wasn't star jasmine, and anyway, the season for that was all but done. The strong, intoxicating scent, filled with desire and longing, rolled up and over me.

A dark mass appeared in my peripheral vision. The shadow obliterated the end of the hedge, and it was darker than any plant-shape in the landscape. It gave me a sudden chill, not least because it was directly across from our bedroom window. I took a few steps toward it. It didn't move. It wasn't an animal. Whatever it was was still and silent.

I walked the path that separated the hedge from the raised beds. Up closer, there was just enough light to illuminate a door. Closer still, the door grew, from a mere three feet tall, to four feet, then five. The hedge grew too, until it was taller than I. Or was I growing shorter? I turned around to check, feeling very Alice-in-Wonderland.

No. Everything behind me—my yellow rose, my Peruvian sage—was normal height. I turned back to the door with its rounded top and rough iron hardware. As I stared at it, the door cracked open, and a strange golden light pierced through. Like it was coming through from Marinka's.

The absurdity of that thought became apparent the moment I stepped over the threshold. This was not our neighbor's yard. Not even close.

A vine wove through an arched trellis tunnel that stretched ahead before bending right. Fairy lights—hundreds of them—shimmered through the twining vines. The path was paved with gravel that had its own sparkle in the lights. The tunnel went on a long way, longer by multiples of the distance down the slope to Marinka's yard. But of course it wasn't our neighbor's property. It was somewhere else entirely. And then I saw a light like a pale dawn way down at the end. I came to the end, and it *was* dawn.

I found myself on a small patch of lawn. Beyond, a stand of conifers formed a barrier to what lay further on. As I stood there, trying to process what was before my eyes, the dawn grew brighter and a first shaft of light hit the treetops. On the other side of the lawn, I came upon a small path that led through the stand of trees. Birds awakened with caws and coos, chirps and songs. The path turned damp and uneven. I then came upon a pond, and a man, sitting on a rock, talking to a frog. I stopped. He was turned slightly away from me. I tried to hear what he was saying to the frog, but he kept his voice low. The red-eyed, green-skinned frog looked back at him impassively and croaked three times. The man nodded and set the frog down gently on a lily pad. He looked up and saw me. "Oh, there you are! I'm glad you found your way through, Thalía."

The man was mature, but not old. He was clean shaven and sported a full head of short, curly

hair, brown mixed with gray. Loose pants, a gray T-shirt and a blue canvas jacket hung from his lean frame.

“How do you know my name?” I asked. “Who are you?”

He stood and grinned. “You can call me Pond Man, as that’s where you found me. As far as my knowing who you are, well, you’re the woman who makes garden dreams come true, aren’t you? Of course I would know who you are!”

I wondered if he was mocking me. The phrase about “garden dreams” was on my business cards (Hazel’s idea). I moved on to my next question. “What the hell is this place?”

He looked a little hurt at my brusqueness. “What this place is, well, it can be whatever you want it to be. We can call it the Domain of Gardens if you like.”

“Okay, Domain of Gardens it is. But why am I here?”

“You make others’ dreams come true. What about *your* dreams?”

“I have a great life. I have everything I ever wanted.”

He shook his head. “I disagree. The door would not have opened if I hadn’t heard your call.”

What call? My perennial stupid complaint about my neighbor’s landscaping? He was pissing me off. I was about to turn and go back the way I came and back to bed.

“Come!” He strode from the area of the pond through a break in the trees.

I looked back toward the way I came, but I couldn’t see the path. “Hey!” I shouted. I ran after him.

We came through to a drizzly autumn garden of rose hips, blazing leaves, and arbors of grapes. The sunny dawn was gone. He presented it to me with a wave. “Tell me what you see here.”

Something inside me unclenched. “Yeah. People don’t understand how transformative a gray day can be, and how beautiful dying plants can be.” I reached out and touched one of the rose hips. “Look at that shade of red. Gorgeous. And of course, they’re edible and full of nutrients, for humans and wildlife alike.”

He rewarded me with a satisfied smile. “This is why you make garden dreams come true. You see the magic. You crave the magic.” He walked away again, toward another break in the trees. “Come see what you think over here.”

Next was a spring garden with dueling hummingbirds, riotous blooms, and a thousand shades of green. “This is the garden nearly everyone wants. And really, who can blame them?”

“This is the sort of thing you create for your clients, isn’t it?”

“To some degree. There are always compromises.” I allowed him to draw me into a conversation about garden maintenance, watering restrictions, and so forth. “I try to create a garden that gives them the most for the least work on their part.”

“Huh.” He chuckled. “But don’t you find,” he asked, “that putting work into something increases its value to you?”

“Absolutely. So, I’m trying to find a sweet spot—a level of maintenance that isn’t intimidating, is successful, and that’s even fun. Success and fun increases engagement. For instance, it might be unreasonable to expect someone to deadhead an entire long border. But a nice large pot of flowers, perfectly framed in a kitchen window? That has the potential to entice a person out of the house, and into the garden.” I took a breath. Suddenly, without meaning to, I had embarked on a speech.

I fell silent as he showed me through other gardens. There was a winter garden of towering evergreens, and a summer garden with corn and sunflowers leaning in on us. In addition, there were gardens of unrecognizable season, rain forests and coastal tropics, and deserts high and low.

I was lost in space and time, heedless of the passing of either. When we arrived back at the pond, the sun was high in the sky. How had I not noticed how late it was? “Oh my God, I’ve got to go. I’m supposed to meet with a client this afternoon. And my wife. Oh my God, she has no idea where I am. How do I get back?” I could hear the panic in my voice.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Pond Man said. “How terribly inconsiderate of me.” He put his hands on my shoulders and turned me to face him. The action was not invited and not welcome, and yet his hands on my shoulders settled me. He went on. “I’m so glad you were able to visit, Thalia. Please come back tomorrow. I would love to share more with you.”

“I don’t know, I…”

He leaned forward and pointed. “Look. There’s your door. Go through, and I’ll see you again tomorrow.”

“Okay, yeah, sure,” I said, although I had no intention at that moment of returning. This place suddenly scared the crap out of me.

Before I could reach the door, Pond Man asked, “Could I beg a small favor before you go?” I turned back. “When you come back tomorrow, can you bring something with you?”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “Anything you like, really. Garden tools, or something else practical. Or perhaps

a nice bit of luxury—some good coffee, or cheese, or something like that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure.” It was pretty easy to promise when I didn’t expect to be coming back. I stumbled through the door, back into darkness.

It was my darkness, my garden. I was back in my own backyard. The moon had barely moved in the sky. The doors to the living room remained unlocked. My phone, in the kitchen where I’d left it, showed the date and time. I’d been gone a total of nine minutes, as if I’d only briefly gone outside as I often did in the wee hours. I slipped off my shoes and padded back to the bedroom.

Hazel had rolled over. Her snoring had stopped; her soft breathing whispered across the room. She would no doubt start snoring again, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t sure what had just happened, but I was glad to be back.

I walked around to my side of the bed and slipped under the covers. What had just happened could not have happened. I must have fallen asleep on my feet and dreamed it all, never mind that I had “awakened” as I stumbled through a non-existent door in my hedge. Had I been sleepwalking around Marinka’s yard? Oh God. Oh well. It wouldn’t happen again, that was for sure. Having decided that in no uncertain terms, I fell immediately into deep, restful sleep.

#

Hazel was up earlier than I, and well into her toast and coffee by the time I came out to the kitchen. I wanted to tell her about what had happened—what hadn’t happened really. It couldn’t have happened. It was a dream. I considered telling it as a dream, but I couldn’t get the words out. I was ashamed of the dream, and self-conscious about Hazel’s reaction.

My wife’s always sanguine personality could be maddening, especially in the morning. Matter-of-fact and cheerful, she nattered on about what was going on at work, sometimes a little snarky about associates, clients, and opposing attorneys, but never whiny. She just got on with life, putting her mug and plate in the dishwasher before kissing me goodbye and heading off to work. She had a court date today, and she was wearing the suit I liked best on her—the light gray pinstripe with round-toed non-spindly heels. She’d sculpted her frizzy red hair into a terrific frame for her freckled face. She glided through life while I tripped and bumped into things.

The garage door closed; Hazel went off to her world, and I prepared to go off to mine. I went outside and confirmed: no door in the hedge. It was all a dream, albeit a dream that was seductive

as hell. It was so enticing, so lush, so unrestrained. I was ashamed of it, and kind of in love with it. And that Pond Man was a character. How the hell I dreamed up someone like that I did not know. It was like he was trying to seduce me, but not. I wasn't into men, even those I met in dreams, the slightest little bit. I couldn't shake the feeling he was real. That uneasy feeling followed me to my new client's home, and I took a moment in my car to collect myself before I went up to her door.

This client was typical for me—white, older, and well-off enough to afford my prices with barely a wince. To be fair, I didn't think the prices were out of line. I was good, I had a reputation, and I guaranteed my work.

This client—whom I will not name—was a Garden Show Creative type. She was full of ideas, enthusiasm, and up on the latest trends. As we toured her property, she was all about how she was doing it for her grandkids and grandpets, but it sounded more like she wanted to impress the kids, the dog, and anyone else who came back here. GSC is a tough type to work with, because what they actually want and what would enhance their garden experience is invariably at odds with what they profess to want. It would be my job to talk her out of the stupid crap she said she wanted—or as much of it as I could—and replace it with something coherent that she and her family could actually use.

But that would wait. This meeting was just to listen, to expand on what she had told me on the phone, to offer advice when asked for, and to save any unasked-for information for the second meeting.

When she asked me for a timeline for completion of the project, I did have to touch upon the realities of our climate. Next week was July. Spring was over, and the sun-baked summer stretched ahead. Summer was the closest thing the region had to a dormant season. It did provide us with plenty of time to define the design and execute the hardscape in time for prime planting season in the fall. I took pictures and measurements and copious notes. I complimented her on her space and her ideas.

Everyone who knew me assumed I loved my job, probably because that was what I said whenever anyone asked. I did love my job. And when a little worm of irritation or just wishing I was somewhere else wiggled into my consciousness, I smothered it. I had a good job, one fitted to my skills, I had a beautiful wife, and we lived in a great house. There was nothing more I needed.

After the meeting I went home and started pulling together my formal presentation. I did some

sketches, made a short list of dumb stuff she needed to be talked out of, and found ways to include all her good ideas.

#

“I can’t believe we’ve lived here five years.”

“I know. Amazing.” Hazel scooted her wine glass around the remains of our deli counter chicken and salad dinner, and raised it to the northwest, where the sun was about to set on this, the longest day of the year.

I was pleased that Hazel loved this place. We were relaxing in Adirondack chairs underneath a patio cover and screen which protected us from the intense summer sun. As twilight deepened, tiny Edison-style lights would come on, lining the surface of the patio cover. Our wine and our empty dinner plates sat on a mosaic table I had designed. It was pretty nice, and it was really real.

Hazel said, “Don’t forget, we have the summer associate party this Saturday.”

I had forgotten. “Oh, jeez. I have a client meeting Saturday. She’s bringing the husband into the discussion.”

“Oh dear.”

“The meeting’s at one. It won’t take more than hour, maybe less.”

“It’s supposed to go from one to five. You want to just meet me there once you’re done?”

This was a casual beach party at Bayside Dunes. There would be families, barbeque, optional swimming, and volleyball. It would take me about ten minutes, tops, to get from the client’s to the dunes. I wouldn’t need a wardrobe change. “Yeah. Sure. That works.”

She chattered on about how she would try to arrive a little after two, and if I could get there by two-thirty, that would be great.

I could, even if it wasn’t my favorite. I liked the people at Hazel’s firm, but I always felt a bit overwhelmed at these large gatherings. I put down my glass and stood. I went to the far end of the deck and looked down on Marinka’s yard. Hazel came over to join me. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“What?”

“Looking down into her yard.”

“It’s ugly. I can’t not look at it.”

Hazel laughed. “On the other hand, if you didn’t look at it, you wouldn’t have to see it.” She had turned in the other direction, toward the city lights in the distance. On a clear day, we could see the distant mountains. In winter, we could see them topped in snow. She loved that view, a view which—along with those of other view properties in the neighborhood—was insured by specific restrictions imposed by our homeowners’ association preventing view blockage from trees.

Something caught Hazel’s eye and she walked toward the hedge. She paused at a spot across from our bedroom. “What’s this?” She traced an arch in the foliage, an arch that matched the outline of the door. “Why is it a brighter shade of green here than the rest?”

Even in the deepening twilight, I could see it. “Oh, that’s just new growth.”

“Huh.” Hazel looked more closely. “That’s weird, how it’s just that one patch there.” She walked back along the length. “It’s not that way in any of this over here.”

“It happens,” I said quickly. “It had gotten a little bare. It’s come back a bit since I adjusted the drip system.” A lie Hazel would never spot, but there I was, lying.

She continued to look at the patch in a disturbingly focused way. “Will it eventually be the same color as the rest of the hedge? I mean, it doesn’t match at all right now.”

“Well, plants are kind of whatever color they need to be.” I moved away from the hedge, hoping Hazel would follow. “But yeah, as the leaves age, they’ll darken.”

Hazel did follow, but with a backward gaze at the hedge, as if it had some pull on her.