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# WILD ANGELS



# URSULA LE GUIN

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#### Frontispiece portrait sketch of Ursula Le Guin by James Brunsman

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O wild angels of the open hills Before all legends and before all tears: O voyagers of where the evening falls In the vast August of the years: O halfseen passers of the lonely knolls, Before all sorrow and before all truth You were: and you were with me in my youth.

Angels of the shadowed ancient land That lies yet unenvisioned, without myth, Return, and silent-winged descend On the winds that you have voyaged with, And in the barren evening stand On the hills of my childhood, in whose silences, Savage, before all sorrow, your presence is.

# COMING OF AGE

#### Prologue

They gave me better than you know and more; and now the road goes downhill. To whom shall I write letters from the marshlands when the hills to which I lifted up my eyes are fallen? Falcon, stay a while, though your mate is gone and you must follow and I go on down alone, too early crowned king of the castle, and now left to find the way back up and to the tower upon the high hills where the falcons nest: the empty tower and my kingdom.

### Ι

Having become at last a grown-up I walk boldly down from the hills, the sunlit steeps, the towers of my birth but not my heritage, to play at hide and seek in the damp hollows among shadows. I do not like the air here, nor the voices screaming Run Sheep Run, nor the hiding places.

Once I used to play among the towers up there, wide evenings on the grass, wind on stone and in the hair of the boys, the young kings, my brothers, dusk rising and young voices calling: it was seemly, a fair game.

I hid once in the angle by the south tower in flowering weeds by warm rock in the last light of October hidden and laughing with terror. Looking up I saw the wide brown wings of falcons beat an instant on the sky drawing all things together. Then a brother found, dragged me to capture, the jail of the windswept autumn grass.

The locks are broken, the doors hang open and the walls fall down that were not walls but vows kept. Now they are broken.

From dank hiding places yet I look up and see in this October the empty sky from east to west all light, all light from south to north, a golden dusk holding the silent and abandoned towers still straight above the courts of windswept grass where quite alone two grey-eyed children play. They are my daughters, yet I will not call them home.

The level sunlight still warms walls; the sky was always empty where the brown wings beat. Call to me here and I will come, knowing my name and the game's rules and all the rest I've learnt. But I will not call their names nor name them to you, those, the children playing in the ruined fort, the little falcons, the inheritors.

#### Π

What I can't get used to here (I'll tell you while we hide together, you faceless in shadow) is the smallness. I didn't look for only cream and honey nor even light and quiet — I don't know what I looked for then: anything that came, and that was large. It comes, and it is small. No, I would not go back. The towers decay, rooms stand empty, the young kings are gone to rule small kingdoms, and above the roofs a falcon calls and calls aloud circling and circling, alone. One does not come a second time into the spacious courts.

And O dark one, dark and bright, and fleet, fleet-winged, and praised, not to be held in any cage of love or use or promises, not to be held and surely to be lost, O hunter, brother, gone now, gone!

No, I would not go back. I am no child now, nor daughter of a king, not in my days nor in the ways I walk. I dream no longer, out of fear perhaps. The little way I go I must go. Therein lies the pride I keep. I am no child now, and will not knock on doors long locked that open only to the touch of kings. Tomorrow is my birthday, and the day of my namesake, flax-haired Fleming, narrow-faced, pale, pale-haloed, wrecked and raped and sainted, leaving her name to many small green islands in a tropic ocean, and to me.

Dolphins play about the islands, lines of silver leaping between water and warm air; seemly, a fair game of lovely clever sea-beasts, a praise of water, of bright spray.

Last night I met an enemy. She had no patience and her voice was high; she hurled chapter and verse at me, anathema, anathema! I had to laugh, but I am scared and sore at having met an enemy, finding her a neighbor, my countrywoman and my like.

I don't buy hair-oil from salesmen nor truth from bigots, not liking cheap products. So last night was anger and tomorrow my birthday and tonight, tonight I can scarcely conceive of dolphins.

# IV

This old notebook I write in was my father's; he never wrote in it. A grev man. all my lifetime, with a short grey beard; a slight man, not tall. The other day I saw five elephants, big elephants, with palm-trunk legs and continents of sides, and one, the biggest one, had bent tusks bound about with brass. They were waiting, patient, to be let outside into the sunlight and the autumn air, moving about their stall so quietly. using the grace of great size and the gentleness, swaving a little, silent, strong as ships. That was a great pleasure, to see that. And he would have liked to see the big one making water. too, like a steaming river,

too, like a steaming river, enough to float ten bigots in. O there is nothing like sheer Quantity, mountains, elephants, minds. O my castle, my fortress, towers fallen, a year you have stood empty and I must rebuild you stone by stone but my hands are empty.

#### VI

Draw the curtains. We have learned how to make the sun set.

An evening of two cripples peering from a trapdoor at rubble: "Is anyone here?" "Is this October?"

No, this is not October nor is it yet November. This is the month when things fall and it has no name nor daylight.

We have not learned exactly how to make the sun rise, yet. Oh Lord, this is a hard world for atheists. Well, draw the curtains, pretending that outside them is a quiet street in an autumn evening, car-lights passing, house-lights not, heaps of yellow leaves. If you will not keep up the world, Lord, I will.

#### VII

Beyond the castle towers lay the hills, folded and forest-darkened or round and covered with dry grass. And we come here to the heart of the pain having reached the heart of peace.

One wild-oats stalk on an empty sky, elegant, fragile, painful, and fulfilled.

I lay on the round hill's back as on a golden elephant turning slowly round the sun, at sunset, prickly straw scratching my neck, and my eyes fixed on the sky straight up above me. I was agreed that if a star shone there I would accept the angels. Westward the evening star, then to the left in pale clarity, shone Vega; to the right another, to the east a fourth, but none above me: only suddenly a pulse of darkness, a small gathering and gesture of the sky, a few birds flying home high up, very high, above me.

Only what dies, answers. Beyond the castle towers lay the hills where I would go alone, and where the months would take their names as kings their red and crimson robes, and I my place: a king's daughter, and less, less, less than a stalk of wild-oats, owner of the irrelevant, exile and at home, rising to walk upward across the heart of pain and the heart of peace

from the towers lifting their fragile stone against the evening sky.

I turn, not knowing if I shall see them fallen.

#### THERE

He planted the elms, the eucalyptus, the little cypress, and watered them in the long dusk of summer, so that in the dry land twilight was a sound of water. Years ago. The amaryllis stick their stiff trumpets still blowing blasts of bright pink up through the wild-oats, unwatered, uncounted, undaunted.

Do you see: there where his absence stands by each tree waiting for nightfall, where shadows are his being gone, there where grey pines that no one planted grow tall and die, and grain that no one sowed whitens the August hills with wild ripeness, and an old house stands empty, there

the averted face of absence turns. There silence returns answer. There the years can go uncounted, seeing evening rise like water through the leaves and as ever over the highest elm Vega like a wild white poppy, opening.

In the country of pain truly there only rises (a white star, a white flower, an old standpipe running water to the roots of trees in a dry land) the small spring of peace.

# FOOTNOTE

I have not only falcons in the family, and towers on golden hills, but also crabs: on the loud flat shore under black cliffs, crabs prancing in the shadow of fierce, stranded seaweed. And there are lots of bats in my inheritance, the flittermouse cracks the cup of twilight by the house of owls and grey acacias, writes my name in the Almanach de Gotha: Ostrogotha.

And the moth is a kind of cousin, and some nights of autumn, rain is my elder brother.

# HIER STEH' ICH

I stand here, feet planted firmly in nothing and brushing away the gnats, state, over the mockingbird's song, I stand here. Where here is God knows still I keep standing.

# SONG

O when I was a dirty little virgin I'd sit and pick my scabby knees and dream about some man of thirty and doing nothing did what I pleased.

A woman gets and is begotten on: have and receive is feminine for live. I knew it, I knew it even then: what, after all, did I have to give?

A flowing cup, a horn of plenty fulfilled with more than she can hold: but the milk and honey will be emptied, emptied out, as she grows old.

More inward than sex or even womb, inmost in woman is the girl intact, the dirty little virgin who sits and dreams and has nothing to do with fact.

### ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE RENAISSANCE

We dug them up in 1951 and, smiling slightly, Pico was revealed fresh as a daisy; in Politian's tomb, dead worms and rotten cloth, dirt, bones.

Look on the rose that bloometh but a day!

For Pico spoke of Spirit and the way to lasting Virtue, while the other said to gather roses quickly.

We resealed the graves; for both, after all, were dead.

#### FROM WHOSE BOURNE

He said he'd been there, yes, the country without seasons. It isn't far, he said, but roads are bad, you have to go on foot. And the cost of living there is astronomical.

It's not forever winter, no, that's a lie, he said; the point is that there is no winter, never. Think of it, no rain, no snow, no cold. But listen, would angels come where winter never came, they of the night, the living night between the winter stars?

He didn't stay there long, couldn't afford it. He learned a few words of the language. He would not speak them here.

#### MARCH 21

Come, give me your hand. The city lies in sunlit mist on the first morning of spring. Come, there is nothing to fear, it's only mist of many winters gone, and the white trees flowering again, flowering over their black branches and my black dry face without eyes.

Take my hand! Only with me will you reach April.

# THE DARKNESS

He has not joined me yet, peers from no mirrors. My skull's my own, so far.

He is the other, smiling from friends' eyes, prince of the empty houses and the lost domains behind me and the last domains before me.

He is the brother and the prince and stranger coming from far to meet me; but we have not met.

And so I fear the darkness like a child.

#### DREAMPOEM

Last night asleep I walked beside death, who had three faces: one was white, one brown, the third I did not see. With her and me there went my husband and a silent friend. "The way," said Death with the white mouth, "will soon end. Wait a little while." The brown mouth smiled. The third mouth was still. We walked on up the hill.

# THE YOUNG

The new life is life is one's own one's very life: Turn not away, spirit! in the body's waste and sour age, from these:

the little weeping babies, children's rage and laughter in the sun.

After death, what follows after? These, these: the old day shining in the new place. O taste the water of your source and go. It will not cease to run, to run.

# THE ANGER

Unlock, unlock! So long a silence needs shouting and latches smashed and the damned hinges broken

and then in ceremonial of open air, the wine poured out: the hands empty: and slowly, grave, straight, smiling, to step across the threshold.

Unlock, set open, set free, the exile waiting in long anger outside my home.

# ARS LUNGA

I sit here perpetually inventing new people as if the population boom were not enough and not enough terror and problems God knows! but I know too, that's the point. Never fear enough to match delight, nor a deep enough abyss, nor time enough, and there are always a few stars missing.

I don't want a new heaven and new earth, only the old ones. Old sky, old dirt, new grass. Nor life beyond the grave, God help me! or I'll help myself by living all these lives nine at once or ninety so that death finds me at all times and on all sides, exposed, unfortressed, undefended, inviolable, vulnerable, alive.

### THE MOLSEN

I made a river, braiding together the Rhine and Seine and Hudson, weaving the grey with green, water and weather, bridges and reeds, another reflecting flood downrunning forever towards—Ah! to what sea?

Out of wet meadows rising in rivermist, the city spire over roof over bridge, distant stands; the streets are full of men; children gaze from windows at the river. What matter? All seas are bitter.

# THE WITHINNER

Returned to the coastline of the continent from the vast interior spaces to pick up supplies from the tradeships, hurriedly Laurus regains his pirogue, loads it and vanishes upstream under the chestnuts acacias madroñas and olives into the immense, uninhabited, hilly, sky-overhung interior

towards the other coast if there is one.

# OFFERING

I made a poem going to sleep last night, woke in sunlight, it was clean forgotten.

If it was any good, gods of the great darkness where sleep goes and farther death goes, you not named, then as true offering accept it.

## ARBOREAL

The family tree has not got back to trees yet; we uproot and move and lack the steady knowing what is good and living on it, that makes wood. Out of the root arises all the dance. He's not yet born who will (O high ash-tree, O rowan fair red rowan on the hill) in flower whiten all the air, heir of the whole inheritance, child of Ygdrasil.

## DREAMPOEM II

Walking down the long street I met a boy who turned his face away and walked on no street toward no end, unborn

The long-winged wild birds over cold marshes rising westward to hills I never saw

a west where no moon sets an east where no moon rises a city where no one walks

I walked on down the street passing my son in silence.

## A LAMENT FOR RHEGED

Frozen thorn, grey north, white hill. Winter binds reeds, rivers. Everything holds still.

Who has returned in the bitter weather to the place of birth? The fire burned here. Under the frozen earth and the white frost. This was the hearth.

Of all the lost children I was chosen to return. O no choice of mine! I chose to sing. The lark's part, the bard's. The wing, the voice, must sink, be still. Lark to the earth, I to the hearth under the cold hill.

I was not born noble but a bondsman bound to the land. Hold still: hold still.

Winter wind binds eye, binds hand.

Who will remember? A place of birth, a place of marriage, the household of summer. Who will praise the work, the kindness, the full table, the hearth of stone?

In the cold days of the end of December in dead Rheged I stand alone.

Winter wind binds hand, binds tongue. The songs are sung. No fires burn.

Yet I return to the winter land having chosen the heavy art, the bond of thing, of stone, of earth. I am bound to stand under the frozen thorn, by the cold hearth, and sing.

### THE ROOFTREE

I bury my dead in the foundations of my house.

There is coming and going on floors above, laughter on stairs, dreams in the beds, a mouse making nests of unread books in outgrown boots in the attic. Swallows return to the eaves. Through the windows, some broken, enter various lights and the shadows of leaves, through the doors, children.

A high house I inhabit with a green roof, all strength, all green taken from the unlit, unspoken unshaken roots.

## SOME OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

can't use it can't count it so refuse it, this the inexhaustible, bountiful, elusive spring of the absurd, brooding over the dark abyss wing, the word.

## SNOW

I am living in the Isle of the Wise and there is nothing wrong. The wind drives along the blessing of the skies.

O bread of heaven, storm of transformation, change sorrow to something strange! In the cold one keeps warm.

## FLYING WEST FROM DENVER

We came up out of thunder into light of evening over all Wyoming

Oh Lord behind my shoulders rises the shadow of the Earth

and underfoot the rainy continents lie blue and blue and bluer to the north

and still behind my back the delicate enormous rising darkness

And ahead no shape no color only a line of atmosphere above which, light

light clear to the edge of light and farther

## WINTER-ROSE

I am the stem of my own rose and the root of the rowan tree

At dawn of the cold solstice the rose blooms red

I am root and blind thorn of the rowan and the rose I am once born and born blind But see the bare boughs bright with berries

and the birds are fed

## MOUNT ST HELENS/OMPHALOS

O mountain there is no other where you stand the center is

Seven stones in a circle Robert Spott the shaman set them

the child watched him

There stands the Henge a child plays with toy cars on the Altar Stone

There stands the mountain alone and there is no other center, nor circle's edge

O stone among the stars the children on the moon saw you

and came home Earth, hearth, hill, altar, heart's home, the stone is at the center

## FOR ROBINSON JEFFERS' GHOST

Thicken, harden, clot, scum of the mind sold cheap, still perishing Republic still shining, O damned beloved land! No words will save you. Nobody listens. But look out for the Coast. At seventy I'll show you: a skinny old woman performing solo the Dance of the Late-Comer, the Fore-Runner. And the deaf will shudder.

Yet I would rather (you too, ghost?) have danced not alone, the word-dance, the rhyming remembering praises, the play of light and surrounding of darkness, feet pounding earth growing firm, resilient: rock in the sunlight planet in sunlight spirit in sunlight hand taking hand in the long dance by the edge of the Ocean.

### FOR BOB

I saw the Pond half my life ago, half forgotten now. I am a good forgetter. No matter. I can read Thoreau, or even better go see my friend who reflects the whole sky plainly. He retains the clarities: one stubborn cabin, and beyond, leaves falling on bright water from the high, uncut trees.

## FÜR ELISE

My daughter's soul sings three or four hours a day the young soul runs the scales and sings from string to string down the deep cello all down the valleys and whispers with the soul of Bach O and shouts aloud to God and I hear her

All she hears of my soul in our separate rooms is a dry tack-tacking and long silences

## FOR TED

The hawk shapes the wind and the curve of the wind

Like eggs lie the great gold hills in the curve of the world to that keen eye

The children wait

The hawk declares height by his fell fall

The children cry

Comes the high hunter carrying the kill curving the winds with strong wings

To the old hawk all earth is prey, and child ELEGY For Reese

She comes down out of the hills light on her feet, straight, spare, with black hair greying, my elegant Jacobin not looking back, but saying

Look: the moon's rising the game's playing hide, hide, seek

Seek but there's no hiding.

It is hard to say her name.

She was the huntress riding light hands on the rein

She was the bright mare straining her heart to the leap

She was the beautiful desperate fox hunted, running, outrunning

O Jeanne! you cannot outrun pain. Brave heart, go slower. There is a ring of seven rocks at the center of the world in summer, full moon, and a fire burning. Find this. The game is not played alone.

> One night she could not sleep for fear and for desire and we were up till dawn to talk and weep, I twenty-one she a year older.

I have been on the high hills with my friend. The hunt is run together, to the end.

The moon went down, the fire went down into white ashes. It got colder. The sea-mist came over the mountain in the west. The light in the east broke. The game ceased

and we woke.

## TAO SONG

O slow fish show me the way O green weed grow me the way

The way you go the way you grow is the way indeed

O bright Sun light me the way the right way the one no one can say

If one can choose it it is wrong Sing me the way O song:

No one can lose it for long



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# Capra Chapbook Series

