

Winter 1993

CRANK!

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SCIENCE FICTION – FANTASY

Issue no. 2

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Opinions of and reactions to the fiction of David R. Bunch vary wildly, but they are never mild. His prose and ideas always aggressively challenge the reader, and the one thing that is certain is that if there were no Bunch, science fiction would be a weaker and smaller thing.

The Soul Shortchangers

David R. Bunch

“HOW slow they have been!” he said, “how backward. Why aren’t they planning? The Indicated Action is so clear-cut that there really should be NO problem. STUPID!”

And I went on counting and listing, thinking that talk was good, but not for me too much. I must listen.

“What would you do,” he said, “if you were back there? Now? Now that you know Purpose?”

He sat upon his throne, the throne that glistened, and angrily he tossed the stars about. One of his Milky Ways whirled like a ribbon in a small wind as he kicked out angrily.

“What is their one and only Purpose?”

The answer was so well-known all through the Cosmos that at first I thought he was only mono-talking. But he glared from the throne that glistened and I said in a meek and even voice, “Why, to glorify you, Sir, the King of All Things, of course. The only true Purpose in all the Universe.”

“HOW?”

“By coming up as souls, shining souls, to Glory.”

“HOW?”

“They are born, they live and they die. Hopefully, they live to die as good souls.”

“YES! Now, how could there be a problem? Why can’t the answer have hit them, long ago?”

“Well, Sir, they’re not quite as smart as you are, Sir, of course,” I said in my even voice.

“Idiot! Imbecile! Stupid dunce!” he raged. “Compared with me, they are zilch in bloom, nought to the nth, and zeros without numbers. NOT THERE!”

"Well – ? YES, SIR!" I said.

"Now, since you've been such a dunce and made such a big dunce statement concerning comparisons, why don't you make up for it by telling me what you'd do?"

"Oh, Sir," I said, "it's clear from here, the thing to do."

"Well??"

"Take inventory – take inventory right away."

"WHAT!?"

"Take inventory. List everything that could help. All the resources."

"Then what?"

"Work it out for maximum. Have no other aim, no diversions. Zero in on what they're meant to do."

"Quit talking around the asteroids and tell me."

"There are trees down there that should be souls!" I said. "And skunks and turnips, too, are being wasted!"

"Warm!" he said, "you're getting close! – THEY think I made them a playhouse."

But something shook in the works then and he was called down world. He had to go restructure some thingumbobbles in a couple of toys he'd made about half as big as a Universe, or some such urgency. I suspected it would (even considering who he was!) take him some while, so as soon as he was gone I went to loaf-on sleep-well status for the length of time I thought he would be away. But I overdid it, considering he had, for this one, gone on his fastest Max – which was Instant. He caught me dozing. He flamed with flaming wrath. "Respect!" he roared, "THAT is all I ask. Just respect. So little to ask. But do I get it?"

"No, Sir," I said. "I mean yes, Sir. Yes, you do, Sir. You get it. I respect you!"

"Piffle! Piffle, piffle, piffle. That's a hot one. You respect me by going to loaf-out sleep-on as soon as my face is turned to solve a problem."

"Sorry, Sir," I said, "but I grew tired counting the resources." And his glance turned black. I should never forget that he can instantly spot a falsehood.

"A loafer and a liar! And to think I chose you as my right-hand help so many many centuries ago. Don't EVER count on this job being permanent!"

"Sorry, Sir. I'll fly right." And I twitched my Heavenly wings in a time of knowing my Security was as feathers to his Wrath.

"So do. By continuing with what you were telling. You had it all worked out for those people down there. Remember?"

"YES, SIR! I was telling what they should do down there in order to accomplish their mission up here, glorifying you. They should take inventory of all their resources and that would spell out their capabilities."

"Capabilities to do what?"

"To be. To happen. To produce – SOULS!"

"YES!" He whirled upon his throne. He made ecstasy signs in Heaven's air. He celebrated. "You're all right," he said, and I knew it was praise, knew I had answered right.

"But they're stupid," I said, trying to garner more praise. They don't produce half the souls they could. They fool around. They avoid it where they can. Then they plan dodges with the souls they have – increasing their life expectancy, trying to evade you. Going on life-support systems! Fooling around with prescription pharmaceuticals and over-the-counter rot-drugs to piece out longevities. Taking advantage of surgical loopholes all over the place to remain alive! sinful men and women! and stay shy of your Heavenly Wonders. STUPID!"

He turned sour. He knew I was padding, and he had a way of just not agreeing that always racked me back to proper fear and trembling." "No, they're clever," he observed, offhandedly. "But that's not 'clever' with me. Not when I have the Last Move, the Final Word, and the Infinite Everything. – So they plan controls? They goof around with devices, pills, and techniques they've got, and plan not to have many. Maybe NONE! They play soul-ball keep-away!"

"Maybe they'll see the Light and start an epidemic or something like that." Almost as soon as I had unloaded it, I realized that, carefully considered, this observation was *not* the most apropos of all the "things to say to God."

He thundered, "The only Light for them is to HAVE *more* souls to send up to me. They should be now and always at maximum soul production. But I hear, right now, at this moment! there's tall and loud debate down there among some of their robed wise-sayers about whether there shouldn't be some kind of soul-production control among these people. So these people can have more time and means with which to enjoy their little lives upon the ball called Earth. Ye Lucifers! REALLY!! Hell and damnation! Do they think I made them a playpen!?"

"They should not be producing anything but souls," I said dutifully. "And they should be sending them up with NO undue delay at all. Dogs and cats don't count. Neither do eggplants or grindstones, except as they're useful to succor one who one day will be yours." Yes! I was off and snowing. "By now they should have that small ball of theirs so computed and laid out

that they'd know precisely how many it could support. It should be as a soul garden now, richly tended for all it's worth. And perhaps they should be producing them by means other and more up-to-date than the slow inefficient ways they continue for the most part to use. – Any less than all-out is blasphemy, as I see it. Why not ALL birthdays and nurseries, and sperm pots to the nth!? Conception! Conception! Conception! Birth! Birth! Birth!"

"Precisely! Right! Right! Right!" He stood by his throne and danced. He really seemed to celebrate. And I felt I was on a right roll.

"And it should not vary much," I continued, eager to please him more. "By now they should know almost exactly how many souls they can get up to you in the average century. They ought to have pinned it down, ere this – to know the right running time for the proper Heaven-readying of a soul – as well as the many other statistics appertaining thereunto. And by PRESENT NOW there should not be any misses at all – I mean spoiled souls – considering all the time their robed wise-sayers have had in which to perfect the methods and means of soul culture. – Things really have not gone well, when you consider Everything."

He stopped dead still, just closed his dance cold off and looked at me, an inscrutable expression on his face and a half-laugh in his eyes. "I'm being – well, what am I being?" he demanded.

"Shortchanged?" I hazarded.

"That's it!" he yelled, "that's it! I'M BEING SHORTCHANGED – SHORTCHANGED ON SOULS." Then he laughed in such a loud and noisome way as he whirled off to check on infinite other projects over the galaxies that I couldn't at all be sure whether he had been serious even a little. Sometimes I thought that allthings meant finally really NOTHING to him, and that in hisconversations with me he merely was having fun, using me assomething of a celestial jackass to help while the Endless Time.

But I couldn't take chances. I had to set myself in good with him, once and for all – if at all possible. Otherwise, like he said, this job might well not be permanent. I could see the handwriting on a cloud. He might put me back to being a merry old soul, wandering around in perpetual Happiness. God, how monotonous that could get! This was more like living.

So he wanted more souls, did he? Very well. "More souls coming up," I said (but he wasn't listening), and fervently I prayed silently that in the excitement he would not trouble to check closely and find out it was but a forced increase, and, oh God, only a temporary solution to the soul-quota problem. Then, with a flourish, I pressed the bureaucratic button tagged EPISODE 3 (WORLD OFFICIALLY IN FLAMES – a renewed transaction).

(Actually, World War III was about due, anyway, and I was fair-hoping he would be impressed with my initiative, as young people's souls, like in millions, all shiny-fresh and young-mint bright, to him whirled up – lifting, lifting like best white mist – fine fine – out of the great battle damage!)

Then, hopefully, while he was busy cataloging and assigning all the new deliveries (tremendously pleased with the largess), there would be time Down There for the survivors to truly “see the Light,” go for the quick rebuild, and then have that long-indicated Change of Heart for Goodness Sake. Not all of the kill technology, certainly, but very much of it simply could be turned about in Purpose, to work in an opposite way for Great Good, for Sacred Life, for Soul Production!! This One More War then just might bring to pass a Magic Transformation like no other. Out of a Havoc almost too mean and human-reft to comprehend could come the Great Comprehension. Which is Goodness, which is putting no other thing in the hindrance way, in the roadblock path of producing Good Souls for that God who values them to the nth, to the utmost Max! – above all other Universe Things.

Oh, I hope so. My job Up Here, which I do so boundlessly like, seems to depend so VERY much on every Great or Small thing THEY do – Down There.

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With this story, Jonathan Lethem becomes our first repeat offender, and this only our second issue. Jonathan is one of the most irrepressible new talents to hit the field in a long time, and I'm sure we can look forward to seeing more of his work in these pages.

The Happy Prince

Jonathan Lethem

THE happy prince was a golden servitor robot named Rex who worked for a family that lived in Isadora, a walled suburb north of Das Englen. His master was Barbaro Jar and his mistress was Barbaro's wife, Roberta Jar. He also served the two Jar kids, Aldo and Franna. Rex was six foot four and beautiful; his creators had modeled him on Michelangelo's David, with the exception of his penis, which was thicker and longer than David's and was circumcised. Roberta Jar favored cut meat.

Rex was the glory of the Jar family and the envy of their neighbors, none of whom possessed such a glorious servitor. Indeed, Rex was unmatched in all of Isadora, and since the inhabitants of the walled suburb never ventured into the madlands outside, for them Rex was unique.

"He really is quite beautiful," remarked a man, who then hoped it would be understood that his was an aesthetic appreciation.

"He's tubular," panted a teenage girl between gum chews. "Like a Calvin Klein ad."

A disappointed young man who fancied himself a poet gazed at Rex. "I'm glad somebody's happy around this place," he muttered, unsure whether he was being envious or sincere.

Rex keeps people diverted, mused the electronic Mayor of Isadora. This is good, he began, and then corrected himself: is this good? The Mayor consulted with the nexus of Mayors from other suburbs, and the answer came back: of course this is good, dummy. The people should be diverted.

"Why can't you be like Rex?" asked a mother of her little boy. He was throwing a tantrum because she'd told him not to stick his tongue out while he played basketball. "You'll bite it off, you know," she said.

"Rex can't dunk!" said the boy.

"He could if he wanted to, I'm sure," replied the boy's mother.

The boy only pouted. He wanted to be like Rex as much as the next guy, only he was never sure what exactly it would mean. The only certain thing was that Aldo and Franna Jar were the two most popular kids in the neighborhood, on no particular merit that the boy could see. The boy wished Roberta Jar were his mother, or that his mother were more like Roberta Jar.

That night the mother of the boy leaned close to her husband as they lay side by side in the dark: "Why can't you be more like Rex?"

The boy's father groaned inwardly, knowing what would come next.

And come it did. "Can we pretend?" asked the boy's mother.

But only Aldo and Franna Jar got to play with Rex (he could dunk, and did, with his mouth solemnly shut) and only Roberta Jar got to screw Rex. Other women in Isadora might screw their inferior servitors, but as often as not they would pretend they were with Rex anyway.

And only Barbaro Jar got to videotape Roberta and Rex together while they were making love. What the whole suburb could only imagine Barbaro could view again and again in the privacy of his den, twice the size of life on his high-resolution screen. Truth be told, though, Roberta and Rex were at it so often that Barbaro rarely had time to view the recordings. The tapes were piling up.

On weekends Roberta sometimes took the kids out to the petting zoo, where children could play with real dogs and cats and guinea pigs. On days like that Barbaro would cast a doleful eye at his video collection, but there was always Rex lurking somewhere nearby, cleaning the house or tinkering with some piece of technology that had gone wonky. It shouldn't have mattered to Barbaro that Rex was there, for he both owned and commanded the servitor. The truth, however, was that Barbaro was always uncomfortable when he was alone in the house with Rex, even if he left the videos unwatched.

Rex always made things worse by exhibiting an acute sensitivity to Barbaro's moods. He would make drinks and offer to rub Barbaro's shoulders, and then pout at Barbaro's stiff, awkward refusals.

One day a swallow stopped to rest on the roof of the building where Aldo and Franna and the other children went to school. His friends had flown to Baja six weeks before, but he had stayed behind, because he was in love with a paper airplane. "She has elegance, poise, and clarity of purpose," the swallow told himself. "It is unimportant that she doesn't get my jokes or like spicy food."

And the swallow was happy, for as long as he could blind himself to her faults. But as the winter days got colder the swallow longed to fly south,

and the paper airplane refused to fly with him. She would only fly with the wind, and the swallow grew jealous and petulant.

Still he did not leave, but shivered and sulked and preened for attention. As the winter gales increased the paper airplane was out with the wind more often, and finally the swallow's hurt resolved into bitterness, and he saw only her failings. "She's single-minded to a fault, inflexible. Instead of gentle curves she has angles, corners. And she loves only strength. Her vision of the archetypal male is oppressing me. The wind can have her." And the swallow finally began his trip to Baja.

In passing he settled on the lawn in the backyard of the Jar home. As it happened, Rex was rooting up dandelions at that moment, and the swallow was immediately captivated, as who wouldn't be, by the servitor's golden sheen.

"You're Rex, aren't you?" said the swallow. "The happy robot."

"I am called that," replied Rex.

"What are you trying to say?" said the swallow.

"I haven't found happiness," said Rex. "And I'm not sure I'm providing any. I'm not sure which I should seek, but it's certainly one or the other, don't you think?"

Codependent, said the swallow to himself. He was too polite to make any personal remarks out loud.

"I serve the Jar family," Rex continued. "But I'm not sure the service I provide them bears the weight of the envy of their neighbors. I make those whom I love uneasy, and am too aware of the aspirations of those I ignore."

"You should think more of your own desires," suggested the swallow, a little bored.

"But if my desires are to please —"

"Then please me for an afternoon," said the swallow, who thought it worth another afternoon's delay to make the paper airplane jealous.

Rex morphed, leaving ninety-six percent of his body inanimate on the ground, and retracted his entire neural spine into his penis, which then shaped itself into a bird and flew away after the swallow.

Rex the penis-bird and the swallow flew over Isadora, flitting from tree to tree, soaring happily in the wind, and singing. For the first time Rex was able to see the people of the town without his being seen by them, and without having to feel the force of their various responses to him.

"I love them all," Rex said to the swallow. "Now that I see them as they are, not twisted by their desires, not preening or pining for me."

"Give it up," said the swallow. "You can never give them anything of

your true self. They can never love you as you want to be loved. Only I know your soul." The bird was talking off the top of his head, but he had sensed immediately that Rex's beauty made his love impossible.

Then, in a burst of unexpected desire, the swallow led Rex to a favorite tree, a potted lemon in the penthouse garden of Isadora's tallest apartment building, and taught Rex about love between two birds. Afterwards the swallow told himself it had been an act of consolation, a one-time thing. But when they flew back to the backyard of the Jar house Rex said: "Don't leave me, Swallow. Stay here and teach me how to love and be loved."

"I'm cold," said the swallow, seizing on this one incontrovertible fact in the face of a muddle of emotions. "I have to fly south or I'll get the flu."

At that moment Roberta and Barbaro Jar who had been examining Rex's inert form as it lay on the lawn, spotted the golden penis-bird and cried out to it. "Rex! Rex! Where have you been?"

"Stay, please," Rex whispered, and then flew down to rejoin the rest of his body. His neural spine uncoiled and reinhabited the slumbering golem, and in seconds he rose from the grass and stood ready before them.

"That was the oddest trick, old boy," said Barbaro. He'd been especially alarmed by the idea of Rex's detachable penis. Despite fervent denials on her part, he suspected his wife of engineering some obscure and kinky surprise, and he'd spent the afternoon fearing that he'd sit in his favorite chair or on the toilet seat and suddenly find Rex's member prodding at him from underneath.

Roberta's relief at Rex's restoration was genuine, however. "Darling," she half-sobbed, and ran to clutch at the servitor's waist, forgetting for once that the children might be watching through the glass doors on the deck.

That night, after Aldo and Franna had been lulled to sleep by Rex's storytelling and lullabies, and after Roberta had spent herself in athletic, vigorous lovemaking with her servitor and had retired with Barbaro to their marriage bed, Rex crept outside and whistled for the swallow.

The swallow came down from a tree and lit on Rex's shoulder. "There is a woman who wants me," Rex began. "She's alone in a room across town, wishing she had someone -"

"There are women who want you all over the place," interrupted the swallow. "Including one right inside that house. She gets you every night and she still wants you. But you don't want her, and you don't want the others. That doesn't do it for you."

"But I feel -"

"That's your pity you feel," said the swallow.

"Then there's nothing I can give?"

"You can give her a token, a fetish to commemorate her desires. A piece of yourself, but not your heart."

So Rex morphed loose a measure of his stuff, and included a single vertebrae from his neural spine to give it animation and response. He shaped this portion of himself into a second phallus and gave it to the swallow to deliver to the woman who was alone in her room.

"And let's send along one of those videotapes," suggested the swallow. "Barbaro won't notice one missing. They're gathering dust."

The swallow took the golden phallus and the videotape and flew across Isadora, through the window of the woman who waited alone, and quietly laid them on her night table, then disappeared from the room without making a sound.

"I have Rex's most important part," the woman said to herself when she discovered the gifts. She viewed the videotape, and what she saw made her gasp: an image of her and Rex fucking. Rex had altered the video using digital animation techniques, and substituted the lonely woman's face for Roberta Jar's.

The woman wondered if she were somehow dreaming. But in the morning the gifts were still there, each inserted where she'd left it.

The swallow returned to Rex, and spent the night huddled under the eaves of the Jar house. When morning broke Rex brought out some food for the swallow's breakfast.

"I'm flying south now," the swallow said. "A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

"Please, little Swallow, stay with me one more day and night. I don't want our time to be finished. I have more to give."

Rex looked so sad that the swallow immediately felt guilty. "Well, just a little longer," he agreed. And Rex left the majority of his body behind and they flew out over the suburb, and found the swallow's favorite lemon tree.

When they returned that evening Barbaro and Roberta werewaiting in the backyard, their arms crossed. "Will you come inside, Rex? We'd like to speak with you."

Rex again whispered "Wait," to the swallow and followed the Jars inside.

"Listen, Rex," said Barbaro. "This thing that's happening with you and the swallow, it's cool with us, it's okay. I hope you know that." He hefted his camcorder and mimed zooming. "We like it. We just want to - watch." Rex didn't say anything.

"As your masters, as, you know, the ones who pay your room and board it just seems like we ought to be able to view - I mean, I think actually if I

consult the ownership papers that we do have a copyright on your sexuality, any reproduction or transmission thereof or something. So, uh, what do you say, Rex?"

"The swallow will go in a few days, perhaps tomorrow morning," said Rex, and just to say it made his heart ache. He wanted the swallow never to leave. "Give us a little time. Then things will be as before." Rex wanted things never to be as before. There were tears in his eyes.

"What are you and that naughty bird *up* to?" said Roberta. She'd sensed Rex's protectiveness on the subject, and pounced. The thought of his having a private life was a major turn-on.

But Rex was gone, outside.

"We must act quickly, my love," Rex said to the swallow. "You must take me and give me away, to all of those who yearn or envy." And Rex began morphing off portions of himself, and including a joint of his neural spine with each.

Oh you big crazy lug, thought the swallow. *Why is your love all mixed up with martyrdom?* But the swallow was moved, and saw that in some way his love was mixed up in the Happy Prince's martyrdom too.

He would have given anything to the paper airplane, if only she had asked. That to him was love. And now someone had asked. How could he allow himself to fail? So the swallow didn't even mention his runny nose or his numb toes.

And so all through the night they disassembled Rex, penis by penis, spine joint by spine joint, and flew delivery missions to every corner of Isadora. And once the Jar family was asleep they pillaged Barbaro's video collection, and Rex altered the videos using computer animation techniques, and they distributed these wide and far over the suburb.

And the men and the women of Isadora who were alone were consoled.

And the wives who wanted Rex were given videotapes that showed them with him, and golden penises for their covert pleasure.

And the wife whose husband wanted Rex was given a golden strap-on dildo with which she could take her husband from behind.

And the husband who couldn't and didn't want to ever get it up again was given a prosthetic device with which to entertain his wife.

And the teenaged girl was given a video of Rex rapping and singing and breakdancing for a stadium full of screaming teenaged girl fans, and yet his eyes seemed to look past the crowd and directly into hers.

And the boy who wanted to dunk was given an instructional videotape showing Rex dunking the basketball from a variety of angles, his tongue flapping loose and free.

And the blocked, embittered poet was given a golden pen with which to write. As a great man once said, an artist cannot create unless he truly believes he possesses the phallus.

And the one homeless person in Isadora – for one had crept in, past the electronic mayor’s defenses – was given a golden fetish which he was able to hock for a meal and a night in a casino hotel, where he was given a complementary roll of quarters with which he won a fortune.

And the paper airplane was given a golden wind-up rubber-band powered balsa-wood companion, for the swallow had forgiven her.

By the end of the night Rex was depleted. All that was left was the original penis and a single joint of his neural spine. With a great final effort Rex unfolded the penis into an entire body, because he still wished to please the Jars, but so little material was available that he could only form a foil-thin replica. This final Rex reflected the light of the rising sun as brilliantly as the servitor ever had, but he lacked mobility, and he was so light that he swayed gently in the morning breeze as he stood in the Jar family backyard.

As the Jars looked from their breakfast table out past the deck they believed they saw their servitor standing ready as always, and they were reassured. But at that moment the swallow, returning from his final delivery, collapsed at the feet of the foil robot.

“Swallow, Swallow, what is wrong?” cried Rex.

“I’m exhausted and sick,” said the swallow. “It’s too cold for me here.”

“You must go to Baja now,” said Rex, though it pained him to say it. “You’ve stayed too long.”

“Oh, Rex,” said the swallow. “I’m done for. I’m not going to Baja.”

“Swallow –”

“Come to me, Rex, and kiss me, ‘cause I’m dying.”

At that the foil robot collapsed, and the material shrank and reverted to its original shape. And the swallow lay its head on Rex’s glans and died. And the fire in the neural coils of the last spine joint flared and died also, and Rex the penis-bird and the swallow lay still together on the lawn.

And Barbaro Jar sued Rex’s maker for a caboodle and won, but the Jar family did not buy another servitor. And the story of Rex was never spoken aloud, but his disassembled self remained the secret treasure of Isadora.

And far across the galaxy, some great and lonely race selected the golden penis and the corpse of the swallow for inclusion in a museum of love. Tour guides recite this tale to hushed auditoriums twice a day, and holographic postcards of Rex are the museum shop’s leading seller.

In Gene Wolfe's classic novel *SHADOW OF THE TORTURER*, the torturer Severian must fetch from the library a copy of the *Book of Wonders of Urth and Sky*. This is one of the stories from the *Book of Wonders*.

Empires of Foliage and Flower

Gene Wolfe

WHEN the sun was still young and men fools who worshipped war, the wise ones of Urth took for themselves the names of humble plants to teach men wisdom. Sage there was, who gave his name to all the rest. And Acacia and Fennel; Basil, that was their anointed leader; Lichen and Eglantine, Orchis, and many more.

The greatest was Thyme.

Thyme's habit it was to walk westward over the world, ever westward and ever older, whitening his beard and waiting for no one; and if ever he turned east, the days and the years dropped from him. The rest are gone, but Thyme (thus it was said) will walk till the sun grows cold.

On a certain day, when dawn cast Thyme's shadow a league before him, he met a child in the road playing such a game as even Thyme, who had seen all games, had never seen before. For a moment Thyme halted. "Little girl," he said, "what is it you play?" For she gathered up seeds of the low-flowered garden pea, and ordered them in rows and circles, making them roll with her fingers; and scattered them to the winds, then gathered them again.

"Peace," she said.

Thyme bent over her, smiling. "I see you play at peace," he said. "Tell me what this game is."

"These are people," the child said. She held up her pease to show him, and Thyme nodded his agreement. "At first they're soldiers like ours," and she marshalled a column, with advance guard, rear guard, skirmishers, and out-riders. "And then they fight, and then they can come home."

"And will they never go to war again? Or fight with their wives?" Thyme asked.

"No," the child said, "No, never."

"Come with me, little girl," Thyme told her, and took her by the hand.

All that day they tramped the dusty road together, mounting high hills and descending into bear-haunted vales where many say Thyme never comes. They crossed the wide valley of the Lagous, Thyme carrying the child on his shoulder at the ford of Didugua. Sometimes they sang, sometimes they talked, sometimes they went silently, walking hand in hand.

And as they walked on side by side, the child grew, so that she who toddled in the beginning skipped and romped at the end. Thyme taught her to turn cartwheels, something he himself does very well.

That night they camped beside the road. He built a small fire to keep her warm, and told her tale after tale, for no one knows as many stories as Thyme. Green apples he picked for her, but they were red and ripe when they left his fingers.

"Who are you, sir?" the child asked, for now that Thyme had stopped, the ten watches of the night twittered and flitted like bats in the bushes about them, and she was a little frightened.

"You may call me Thyme," he told her, "and I am an eremite. That means I live with the Increate, and not with men. Do you have a mother, child?"

"Yes," she said. "And my mother will be worried about me, because I'm gone."

"No," Thyme said, and he shook his white head. "No, your mother will understand, because I left a prophecy with her when you were born. Do you know it? Think, because you must often have heard it."

The child thought; and when the cricket had sung, she said, "'Thyme will take my child from me.' Yes, sir, Mama often used to say that."

"And did she not say anything more?"

The child nodded. "She said, 'And Thyme will surely bring her back.'"

"You see, she will not worry, child. The Increate is father to all. I take them from him – that is my function. And I return them again."

The child said, "I don't have a father, sir."

Again Thyme shook his head. "You have the Increate and you have me. You may call me Father Thyme. Now go to sleep."

The child slept, being still quite small. To make a small enchantment for her, Thyme moved his hands; gossamer covered her to keep her warm, and the flying seed of cottonwood and dandelion. She slept, but Thyme stayed awake all night to watch the stars.

In the morning the child sat up, rubbing the seeds from her eyes and looking around for Thyme. Thyme rose from the fields to greet her, sweet-smelling and wet with dew.

"I have to wash my face," the child told him. "I'd like something to eat too, and a drink of water."

Thyme nodded, for he understood that she indeed needed all those things. "There is a brook nearby," he said. "It lies to the east, but that cannot be helped."

He led her to it; and as they walked, his beard, which had been white as winter snow, grew frosty, and at last iron gray.

As for the child, because she walked with Thyme, she became younger and younger. When they reached the brook, she was hardly older than she had been when Thyme had seen her playing peace in the dusty road. Nevertheless, she scrubbed her face and hands, then drank from her hands, scooping up handful after handful of clear, cold water from the brook while Thyme picked berries for them both.

"Why is the water so cold, Father Thyme?" she asked him. "Did it sleep out all night too, but with nobody to cover it?"

Thyme chuckled, for he was beginning to recall the ways of men, and even something of the ways of little girls. "No," he told her. "Trust me, my child, when I say that water you drink has been busy all night dashing down past rocks and roots. But it has run down from high mountain slopes where even Crocus has not yet set foot."

"Is that where the men fight?" she asked.

Thyme nodded. "For a thousand years your Easterlings have warred with the Men of the West, making the high meadows of the mountainsides their battlefields. Doubtless there is blood in that water you drink, though there is too little for us to see. Do you still wish to drink it?"

The child hesitated, but at last scooped more. "Yes," she said, "because that's all there is to drink."

Thyme nodded again. "I drink pure rain, for the most part, mingled with a little dew, and there is no blood in either. You could not do that; you would become very thirsty, and die before the next rain. Drink as you must."

Hand in hand they walked west, eating wild raspberries from Thyme's old hat, the child hardly higher than Thyme's legs. But soon the top of her head had reached Thyme's waist; and when the last raspberry was eaten, she was nearly as tall as he, and they walked on arm in arm across the plain.

Thus they came to green Vert, that great city, the Boast of the East; and all who saw the two thought them a grandfather and his granddaughter, and smiled to hear Thyme ask if the road was not too weary for her, or the way too hard; for the child had grown lithe and long of limb, red-cheeked as an apple, with lips like two raspberries and eyes like the midnight sky.

Now it so happened that Patizithes – the Prince of the East, the Lord of All the Lands That Lie Beyond Lagous, the Margrave of the Magitæ, and the Wildgrave of the Wood, the youngest son of the Emperor and heir to the Throne of Imperial Jade (for he mourned five brothers) – saw them enter the city. Patizithes had been inspecting the Guard of the City Wall, a guard of boys and old men, and fretting at the duty, for he wished to ride to the war, feeling that he might win in a week what had not been won by his fierce father's war-tried warriors in a millennium. But when his gaze strayed from the boots and the buttons, the well-buffed broadswords of the boys and the burnished bucklers of the old men, he saw the child (grown a young woman) who walked with Thyme.

Quickly he dismissed that feeble formation, drew off three rich rings and dropped them into his pocket, and canting his cap at an elegant angle, dashed down to greet them at the gate while they were still being scrutinized by the sentries.

"Old man," said the senior sentry, "you must tell me who you are, and what it is you want in our city."

"I am but a poor eremite, my son," Thyme told him, "as you see. For myself, I want nothing from your proud city, and that is what I shall receive from it – a few broken bricks, perhaps, and a pretty fragment of malachite. But this child wishes to learn of peace, and of the war that took her father, and I have come with her, for she could not have reached this place without me."

Precisely at this point, Prince Patizithes appeared. "My friend," he said, smiling at the senior sentry (who was utterly astonished to be addressed so by the proud young paladin), "even you ought to be able to see that these travelers mean no harm. The old man's too feeble to overpower anyone, and while those eyes might vanquish whole armies, such conquests are no breach of the peace."

The senior sentry saluted. "It's my duty, sir, to question everyone who seeks to enter by this gate."

"And you have done so," Prince Patizithes pointed out. "I merely remind you that it's equally your duty to admit them when they've satisfied you as to their good intentions. I know them, and I vouch for them. Are you satisfied?"

The senior sentry saluted a second time. "Yes, sir! I am indeed, sir."

"Then come, dear friends," Prince Patizithes pointed to a little park, where a fragrant fountain played. "This quiet spot exists only to welcome you. Wouldn't you like to bathe your feet in its cool waters? You can sit on the coping while I bring you a little food and a bottle of wine from that inn."

While Thyme threw his long length on the soft green grass, the charming child permitted Prince Patizithes to hold her hand as she stepped across the cool stone coping and sat waving her weary feet in the fountain's chanting waters. "How could your city have known we were coming?" she asked. "So as to have this park ready for us?"

Prince Patizithes pursed his lips, feigning to ponder. "We knew that someone worthy of such a place must come at last," he whispered warmly. "And now we see that we were correct. How do you feel about duck? Our city's as famous for its teal as for its hospitality."

The child nodded and smiled, and when Patizithes had gone, stepped under the silver spray, washing the dust of many roads from her hair and face, and wetting the thin shift that reached now scarcely to her thighs. "Isn't he nice?" she asked Thyme.

"No," Thyme told her, sitting up. "No, my child, not he, though I may bring out some good in him before the end. He is brave because he has never been injured; generous, but he has not toiled for the food. You may trust me when I say that much more than that is required."

"But he likes me, and I'm a big girl now."

"Then ask yourself whether he would like you still, were you still a little one," Thyme told her. "That is the test."

"I still *am* a little girl inside," the child said. "It's only that going with you has changed my outside, Father Thyme."

"As he is still a little boy within," Thyme told her. "He has been changed as you have been changed, and in no other way. Do you see that woman with the basket of limes on her shoulder? She has borne many children; but the child in her is no larger than the child in you."

"Is there a child in everybody?" the child asked.

"Yes," Thyme told her. "But in some it is a dead child. And they are far worse than this young man."

Prince Patizithes appeared as he spoke. The proud prince bore a patinated brass platter – a servile service he had never performed before – but since he had seen the servants and slaves of his father's palace present comestibles in casseroles all his life, he lifted its lid with a fine flourish. "Roast teal," he announced, smiling. "Well stuffed with chestnuts and oysters, or so I am assured."

The charmed child served him an answering smile that pierced his poor heart.

"Wine too!" To cover his confusion, he brought a cobweb-cloaked bottle of Vert's best vintage from one pocket, popping the cork with a tug of his teeth, and taking two tall tumblers from the other. "Wine for you, Father. . . ?"

"Thyme," Thyme told him.

"Father Thyme. And wine for this fair lady. Your niece, perhaps, sir?"

"My adopted daughter, my son." Thyme took the tumbler and tossed it down.

"Won't you join us?" the child asked as she sipped.

The proud prince shrugged sorrowfully. "Alas, that rat-infested inn had only those two tumblers. But if I might have a swallow from yours. . . ?"

Shyly the child gave him her glass, and pointedly he pressed his lips to its rim, where her own ruby lips had lingered only a moment before.

Thyme cleared his throat. "We have come to your city so that this child might see of what stuff war is made. You seem to be a person of consequence here. Would it be possible for you to arrange an interview with one of your generals for her? I would be grateful, and so would she, I know."

The deceitful prince dipped into the dressing for a savory oyster. "I could try to set up an interview with our emperor's son for you two," he said slowly. "It wouldn't be easy, perhaps. But I could try."

The child asked eagerly, "Or with the emperor himself? I want to ask him to make peace with the Men of the West."

"Those yellowbellies?" The prince spat. "I don't think my – our beloved ruler would really go so far as to punish you for that. But to be honest, dear maiden, I don't believe it will be of the slightest use."

Thyme tipped the cobweb-wrapped bottle above his tumbler. "Nor do I," he said sorrowfully. "Except to her."

"If it will be of use to her, I'll arrange it," Patizithes promised. "But first she must be dressed for court. It won't do for her to be presented in that ragged shift, though you, as a peregrine holy man, may dress as you like."

Thyme tasted the wondrous wine in his tumbler thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose you're right, my son. The child must have some new clothes."

"And I'll see to that too," the prince pledged. "I know a seamstress who makes gowns for the most fashionable court ladies. I suppose it might take her a month to run one up, though; you could stay with me till it's ready. Have you that much time?"

"All that we require, my son," Thyme told him. Thyme was taking charge of the teal, of which the lovely child had claimed no more than a leg, and Prince Patizithes was utterly astonished to see him bite the bare bones as easily as the child had eaten the meat.

"That's settled, then," the prince said with satisfaction; and as soon as the two had made their meal, he brought them both to the seamstress, who curtsied like a countess when she saw the royal patron at her drawing-room door.

"Madame Gobar." Patizithes pointed.

"What a wonderful figure!" The seamstress sighed, chucking the child beneath the chin. "You've hardly need of me, my dear, with that tiny waist and that face. Any little dressmaker could wrap you up in silk and slap on a few pearls and pack you off to court looking like a princess."

"Which she will never be, worse luck," the prince pointed out. "And I beg you not to be extravagant with those pearls."

"You're right, of course, Highness," the seamstress said. "Elegance and simplicity. And a silk that's like spring grass. I'll get it."

When the seamstress had slipped off to her storeroom, the child whispered, "Why does she call you *Highness*, kind sir?"

"It's merely a courtesy title." Prince Patizithes soothed her smoothly. "A bit of flattery our city's tradespeople lavish upon those whose station in life is somewhat more elevated than their own."

Thyme sighed. "I see."

The seamstress had brought a bolt of bright silk. She laid it on her table and put up a painted screen to close one corner of her chamber. "If you'll just step behind this, my dear," she chirped, "and slip out of that – that *thing* you're wearing, I'll take your measurements."

The beautiful child nodded dutifully, and slipped behind the screen, soon followed by the seamstress.

The prince looked grim. "This will take half the day, I'm afraid. We should have kept the wine."

"I did," Thyme told him, bringing the bottle from beneath his colorless old cloak. "No glasses, though, I fear. I have bad luck with them – they break so easily." He passed the black bottle to Prince Patizithes, who was somewhat surprised to find his wine gone sour.

"That should do it," said the seamstress, stepping from behind her screen. "I shall have her gown ready –"

Thyme's cold eyes caught hers. There was the slightest of pauses.

"– by tomorrow. Tomorrow before noons, I should imagine."

"Fine," Thyme told her.

"And I've loaned her an old dress to wear until then," the seamstress proceeded breathlessly, "that is, she really doesn't have to return it."

"We thank you," Thyme told her; and as he spoke, the child stepped silently from behind the seamstress's screen, scarcely less lovely than a summer sunrise.

The prince gasped.

Thyme's mouth twitched, and he suppressed a smile. "This audience you promised to arrange for us, do you think you could make it for tomor-

row afternoon?"

The child smiled too. "Yes, it would be marvelous. Could you?"

"I think so." Prince Patizithes nodded nervously. "Anyway, I'll try. I – my house is outside the walls. It's only a league or so. My carriage is at the gate. I'll bring it if you like."

"That might be best," Thyme told him. "This poor child and I have already walked some distance today."

"Of course, of course!" Prince Patizithes darted through the dressmaker's door.

Wearily, the child chose a chair. "He is nice," she told Thyme, "whether you think so or not."

"As nice as peace?" Thyme asked her seriously.

The seamstress simpered. "He's royal, my darling, and to be royal is ever so much better than to be nice."

"Perhaps." Thyme turned away and walked to the window. He had hardly reached it when a whip cracked outside. The prince's equipage came rattling over the cobbles, and four footmen leaped to open its doors and draw out a deep green carpet.

"Slippers!" The seamstress snapped her fingers. She flung herself into the search, but she had started too late. Lightly as any lady, the child smiled, gave her a little pat of parting, and put her hand into the prince's to help herself up the steep step. Frowning, Thyme followed, choosing a seat that faced the child.

Prince Patizithes raced around the high rear wheels to duck through the other door and sit beside her. "We've shoes aplenty," he assured her. "Guests are always leaving them. You know how it is. You may have whichever pairs you like."

The child thanked him with her eyes. "Are there green ones to go with my new dress?"

Their coachman clucked his tongue to his team and cracked his black whip, the white horses leaped like lurchers after a leveret, and the prince's rich equipage jerked and jolted up the cobblestoned street.

Patizithes laughed. "Why there's nothing *but* green ones, I'll take my oath. Because of the war, no lady of Vert has ever dared come to court in anything else."

The sentries snapped erect and saluted them smartly as the ghostly team galloped through the postern gate. Patizithes had lied about his lodge (for it was to such a hunting house in the forest royal that his carriage carried them) when he said it lay but a league away; their horses were heaving and lathered with sweat whiter than they before all the weary watches that

brought them to that lonely lodge were done.

Yet it was lovely. The child stared at its tall chimneys and the thronging green trees of his father's forest with dazed delight. "Do you really live here?" she asked Patizithes in a bewitched whisper.

"It's just a shed," he said. "I've a little place in town as well, but I know you'll be more comfortable here, where each of you can have a private apartment.

At evening, while the whippoorwill called from the tall cherry tree and the nightingale rained her sweet notes on the world, Prince Patizithes and the changed child watched lovely Lune's head lifted by the slow rotation of Urth, and strolled the strange walks of the grotesque little garden the prince's poor grandfather had graded and planted while weeping for his wandering wife. Fragrant were the ramping pink roses and the fading forget-me-nots that night; but he found the child's musky tresses more fragrant far. And sweet though the birds' songs sounded, she found the prince's poor promises sweeter still.

The two thought themselves alone. But all the while, one watched with the night-wide eyes of love. While they paced the pebbled paths between the silent flowers' spiked arrays, sage Thyme spied upon each pale sigh, peeping between bloom and leaf. And while they sat side by side and hand in hand on the stained stone bench beneath the spreading wisteria, Thyme watched unwinking from the midnight face of the mute sundial.

And while they lay lazy on the soft grass, swearing the sweet oaths of love and longing, and whispering as they parted that though long lives might pass like a night and the New Sun sunder the centuries, yet never should they ever part, Thyme crept and cried, counting seconds that spilled with the sand from the hourglass, and scenting the soft breezes that cooled the child's burning cheek with his sad spice.

The cock crowed as Thyme tapped impatient toes at the lofty lodge's deserted door, but the lovers slept long. It was nearly none ere the coach came, carrying a pauciloquent child prince and a cheerless child. Together the three traveled along the rugged road that runs to the great green gates of Vert; but scarcely they spoke one word, and though Thyme turned anguished eyes from face to face, while watch waited upon watch, the cheated child never met that grim gaze. No more gave she her grave glance to the prince perched on the soft seat beside her, though her hand sought his, and sometimes failed to find it.

In a space scarcely short of miraculous, Madame Gobar, the seamstress, had sewn such a green gown as any virgin nymph would willingly have

worn to Vert's stiff court. "No pearls, you see, Your Highness," she told Prince Patizithes in the honest tones of one who takes and open pride in having done her duty. "A few small emeralds, and a nice big aquamarine or two. And she loves it – don't you, my dear?"

She did. But before she could smooth her skirt and gaze a moment in the glass, off flew the coach, charging down the dirty streets of Vert and never pausing until it pulled up before the broad stair whose steps stretched to the portals of the palace.

Soon and swiftly they were sent before the emperor's own imperial throne; and there the poor child voiced her plea for peace through chattering teeth.

"I do not know how many men have died," she said. "Your Majesty will know that better than I; but I know my father was one of them, and that as we came here we saw unworked fields everywhere, houses falling to ruin, and women plowing – plowing badly – when the plowing should have been done weeks ago. We saw women sowing grain instead of shirts, cattle and sheep that had been killed by bears and wolves, and hungry children."

"Boys who can never grow into strong soldiers," Thyme added, addressing the emperor, "and girls who will never breed them."

Some shocked courtiers gasped at all this, grabbing their gowns and clutching their cloaks as though to keep them clear of contamination. But the stern, scarred old emperor never heeded them, nodding his head and neither smiling nor scowling.

"I have lost my father," the child continued. "I know that you have lost five fine sons. Only one is left to you. I love him, and so do all your other loyal subjects, I feel sure. Won't you make peace?"

"Peace has been made many times," the emperor said solemnly. "And each peace has only led to a new war. What is the good of treaties and truces where there is no trust? The fighting stops, and our enemy rearms."

With that, the elderly emperor's voice sank to silence, and a sullen silence hung heavy over all that gay green gathering. Some aged courtier coughed, and there was the faint scuffle of many shuffling feet. Prince Patizithes strode forward to stand beside the confounded child. Silently, he slipped his hand into hers and led her to an alcove. "I promised you an audience," he told the child coldly. "I didn't promise you that it would help things, and as you see, it hasn't."

Thyme told her, "You tried, and that's something not many have done."

Just then, they were joined by a general, an old officer whose bottle-green uniform bore many an enameled medal, besides the usual battle honors. His hair was gray, his visage grim, his eyes the green of Vert. "Your

Highness," this green general growled, "may I interrupt? I think it will only take a moment."

"You already have, Generalissimo," the prince pointed out.

"You are young," the green general said gravely, "and so you think wisdom is to be found in pink cheeks and bright eyes. We who bear the weight of past years know that white hair or a bald head is a better indication of it. Since you have brought this old, and I suppose holy, hermit to the court, I would like to make use of whatever hard-won wisdom he may possess while I can."

"Then speak, my son," Thyme urged graciously.

The hoary-headed old officer did not hesitate. "How can we win?"

"You may win," Thyme told him, "when your army is dressed in yellow."

For a moment the grim old general stood stunned. "You can counsel me to dress my soldiers like the enemy," he said slowly, "but I assure you that though I am master of all our armies, I cannot do such a thing. Nor would I do it if I could. I would rather lose the war than do as you suggest."

"Then you will not have to," Thyme told him. "Because I will do it for you."

The old officer turned upon his heel and left them without another word.

Thyme watched his retreating back, then said softly to the child, "Now I too must go, and you must come with me."

She shook her head. "I love Prince Patizithes," she said. Thinking that he still stood at her side, she looked around the alcove for him; but the prince of Vert had vanished.

"You will come with me." Thyme turned and walked away, his black boots tapping the tessellated pavements of the palace like the ticking of some slow clock.

"And he loves me!" the child whispered to herself; but there was no one but herself left to listen.

That night it rained, and Thyme sat drinking drop for drop with a broad banyan tree. As soon as the last drizzle stopped and the sun was seen, he rose and returned to the road. He had not walked much more than a watch when he heard the hurrying child calling. "*Thyme, Father Thyme, stop! Wait for me!*"

Without waiting, or turning toward her, or even so little as looking behind him, he murmured, "Thyme waits for no one," and walked on.

It was early evening before she walked with him as she had when he had

brought her to the city. "I want to tell you," she said.

"I know." He nodded. "And you are old enough now to tell Thyme, if you wish."

Slowly then she spoke of the old garden and the green lawn on which she had lain with her lover; then of the threats he had thrown in her frightened face, because she had wished to remain where he would reign, though she would be called his concubine.

"Did I do wrong?" she asked at last.

"No." For a second Thyme stopped, turning to take in the road that returned to Vert. "Very small, child, are the flying days of love, and men and women must catch them when they can, if they are to know love at all."

The child shook her head. "Wouldn't it be better not to know love at all, than to know a false love?"

"No," Thyme answered again, turning back to their way once more and taking her by the hand. "In the desert, travelers see pools of water where no water is; but those who see these pools know how real water must look, if ever real water is found."

So Thyme spoke, and soon no more was said, though arm in arm they walked together. Their road had reached the rugged hills, and now wound higher and higher, turning and twisting till at length it mounted to the mountains. There it went with a wider, fairer way, where green grenadiers counted cadence for callow conscripts, brave youths and young boys with pallid faces, who flaunted pikes.

With each cubit they climbed, the cherry-lipped child who had ventured to Vert vanished. Lines led from her eyes to her ears, and strands of silver streaked her once sleek hair. The food they found and the rough rations Thyme took from some of the soldiers seemed to thicken her hips and bulk her breasts; and at last, with their road long lost, when they went their way guided only by the onrush of the green emperor's army, she laid palsied palms upon her broadened belly and knew there the feeble flutter of new life.

Drawn the child looked before the dawn, in the hour when her own child came. Then Thyme himself knew terror; for it not so (as some say) that Thyme heals all things, though healing he has. But Thyme himself tied the cord and comforted his tired child, pressing her babe to her breast.

"Now I must go," Thyme told her. "You must have food and good water, and rags with which to diaper your son. Keep him warm while I am away, and yourself as well." He set sticks by her hand, so that she might feed their fire, saying, "I will return as soon as the Increate wills it."

Then night closed over his old gray cloak; he was gone like some ghost. The chilled child lay alone save for her son, alone and lonely, shaking with the flickering, guttering flames in the white wind that whipped the wide green skirt Madame Gobar had made, shaking too with terror as she heard the wild howls of the wolves that batten on battles, the slayers of the slain.

More than these, she feared the fierce soldiers who surged about the wretched brush that sheltered her and her son. They who had been boys had been made beasts, bent if not broken by their battles, the henchmen of Hell and the disciples of Death – thus she thought. Then her babe embraced her breast, sucking his mama's sweet milk; and soon her heart soared. Such was the mutability of his mother. Such, indeed, are the shiftings in all human hearts.

Somewhere a stick snapped, and her bliss broke with it. She staggered to her feet, and would have fled if she could; but she could scarcely stand. Part of her wretched protection was rolled away. A short sword and a worn face caught the firelight. For a moment that seemed a month, her eyes met his. "By the book!" the startled soldier swore. "What in the name of awful Abaia are you two up to?"

"My son's having his breakfast, as you see," she said; "and I was resting, until you came."

The soldier lowered his sword and pushed through the brush. "Then sit down." He held out his hand; and when the child had clasped it, and sat as he had said, he sat himself, sitting so his broad back blocked the hole he had made in their screen of brush.

"Did you see our fire?" she asked. "I feared someone would, though Thyme piled as many dead bushes and branches as he could around this windfall before he built it."

"Thyme?"

"My father. Or at least that's what I call him, since he cares for me. You needn't be afraid. Thyme's an old man, you can kill him easily, I'm sure."

The soldier shook his head, his eyes on the baby boy. "I wouldn't do that. What's his name?"

The child had not yet chosen one, not knowing one would so soon be needed. Now she blurted, "Barrus!" Barrus had been her brother, in days that seemed a dream. Her bold brother, and her father's favorite.

"Ha!" the soldier said. "The handsome one, eh? Well, he's handsome enough, I'll admit, for somebody so new to this world. But may I ask what you're doing here, on a battlefield in a ball gown?"

"Seeing war," she said. "I think so that I'll know what it is when Thyme brings peace."

"You'd better go back home," the soldier told her. "Before you're killed – you and your child too. Before some fool shoots you, or you starve or freeze to death."

"We're going on, I think." Barrus had released her nipple; he was asleep. She slid the strap up so her silk bodice hid her breast. "Over the mountains to the Yellow Empire."

"In that green dress? That's suicide." A brass clasp held his soldier's sagum. He opened the clasp, pulled off the cloak, and handed it to her. "This was green when it was new, but it's gray now. It may not get you through alive, but it'll keep you warmer till you die."

Tearfully, she tried to thank him, though she only sobbed and stammered.

"Don't worry about me." The soldier shrugged. "There's plenty of dead men out there, and their cloaks don't keep the chill off any longer. I'll get another one – a newer one, with any luck." He rose to go.

Winking back her weeping, she blew him a brave kiss. He caught it, smiled suddenly (he seemed but a boy when he smiled), and was gone as the dark gave way to dawn. Hot tears streaked her tired cheeks; she closed his cloak about herself and Barrus, her baby boy.

So Thyme saw them when he pushed aside the brush – wrapped in warm wool, and peacefully asleep. When the child woke and Thyme chided her for crying, she would say only that those who have seen clean water in the desert's depths, without drinking, are entitled to tears.

Slowly they mounted the mountains' stony sides, old Thyme taking her hand and the child cradling her child. In time of peace, travelers would trudge the passes, as Thyme assured her, At present, divisions defended every defile, holding each high road against whole armies.

A bit before evensong, they were to witness such a struggle. Thyme stopped, pointing for the child with the pine staff he had chosen before they had left the last trees behind. "Do you see the green squares?" he asked sadly. "This is no skirmish, but some major matter."

It seemed a storm had struck the mountain-cut below. The arrows flashed like lightning, and they heard the thunder of the guns. A surging green square gained ground, then wavered and went out like the lambent flame of some snuffed taper; a second square crept up the slope, covering the corpses of the slain.

"See how resolutely they advance." Thyme tapped a stone with his staff as he spoke. "Determined to win or die! Would you care to say which you think it will be?"

She shook her head. She felt sure the soldier whose wool sagum she wore served in that square, though she told herself truly there was no way of knowing. Like the last, this square perished in the pass.

A yellow column came, sliding along like a snake from the wild wadis of the West. Green cavalry gave it check, then gave way. Scattered green soldiers followed, fleeing.

"The westerners have the victory," she said to Thyme, "and soon they will take Vert. Then there will be peace."

Thyme took up his staff and stood, ready to resume their march. "That pass has changed hands many times," he told the child. "And the war is not yet won."

That night they camped near the enemy army. "Now wash your dress," Thyme told her. "I will keep my eyes off you." She did as he bid, scrubbing her soiled green gown in a sparkling stream. Sometimes soldiers stopped to talk with her. She was covered by her cloak, and she feigned a friendliness that was soon sincere. "Yellow will never yield," the newest recruits replied when she pleaded for peace. The older soldiers only shrugged, or spit, or spoke of something else. Although their accent was strange, she soon ceased to notice it, speaking just as they spoke. No one she had known wore yellow, yet save for their yellow coats the young men could have been her cousins.

"Will there never be peace?" she asked Thyme when her dress was dry.

"You will see," he said, and would say no more.

When the next day dawned, her baby, Barrus, could walk with his mother. Thyme found him trousers and a shirt, she dared not ask where, and she shortened the little legs, and the sleeves of the shirt. From the peaks they could see the plains, and in the misty distance the spires of Zant, that unyielding yellow city, glorious with gold.

Barrus told tales of days she was sure he had only dreamed, chattering to the child of childish notions she had never known, then comforting her with kisses. "My mom forgets, doesn't she?" He giggled, grinning. "But you always remember, Father Thyme, don't you?"

Thyme sighed and shook his head. "It is my task to wipe away. As you will learn."

They found a road that roved from wood to wood. Stunted shrubs made way for white pine, alder, and pale aspen. Barrus had a knife now, and cut a clever whistle with which he piped their progress from peak to pass, and at last to the mountain meadows. He did as Thyme told him, but defiantly,

not freely. At each step they took he grew taller, and more sulky and more sullen. "I can beat Thyme," he told his mother, tapping his toes to a tune he had taken from the thrush.

"Please don't!" She felt frightened; Thyme was their only friend.

The great sage grimaced. "They always think they can, at his age."

A day of drizzle brought them to the bright gates of Zant, weary and wet. Sentries stopped them, guards in gorgeous golden armor who addressed them in the babyish voices of boys or asked the quavering questions of senescence.

"We only want food and shelter," Thyme told them. "Food, and a fire, and a little peace. Those are our only reasons for coming to Zant."

Perhaps the guards pitied the palsied old man, for they opened the gilt gates for them.

"Are we going to go to an inn?" Barrus asked. He pointed to the painted boards grouped near the gate: the Golden Goblin, the Pilgrim's Pause, the Royal Roast, and many more, all pied with paint to picture the Goose Girl, the Pilgrim putting down his pack, the Singing Oriole, and so on, so that even those who could not read the names could take their ease at an inn in any case.

"No," Thyme told him. "Or at least I hope not. This is the country of gold, so nowhere does gold buy less than here."

He stopped at the step of a private dwelling, rapping its dark door with a ring hung for that purpose. "Madame," he said to the wary woman who came to his knock, "we are poor travelers, seeking a lodging for a night or two at a price we can afford. Can you tell us of some decent family who might take us in? We cannot pay much, but we will lay down ready money for whatever we get."

"No." The dour woman would have shut her door and shot its bar, but that Thyme's blunt black boot blocked its edge.

"If not yourself, perhaps some neighbor?"

"I don't dislike any of my neighbors that much," the dour woman told Thyme. "Now get your foot off my threshold, or I'll call the dog."

Thyme stepped back, bowing as her door banged shut.

A meager little man in a long yellow cloak stopped as it slammed, looking as wet as they were. "I heard what you said. I've got a room in a decent enough house, a couple of streets over. They might take you and your wife—"

"My daughter, my son."

"And your daughter, I meant to say. And your grandson, if you can pay."

Thyme thanked him, and they went with him, down one sodden street and up another, until at length they arrived at an old-fashioned high city-

house, ornamented with carvings now decayed, with a second story overhanging the first, a third that overhung the second, and giddy garrets that overlooked the wall.

Cheaping with the landlady, Thyme got the child and Barrus a garret and rented a similar room for himself. When the meager man who had guided them to the house had gone, their new hostess asked them how well they knew him.

"Less than you, I'm sure." Thyme knelt by the tiled hearth that was now his own, for this night if not forever. There was a little tinder and a log or two.

"You won't get *that* burning," said Barrus.

"In time," Thyme told him. His flint scratched his steel, sending a shower of flying sparks to the tinder.

"Because," the landlady continued confidentially, choosing to chat with the child, "we really know nothing about him here, except that he pays."

Thyme puffed his tinder. "He seems and honest enough man." A small swirl of smoke curled toward the chimney.

The child shivered; her cloak was soaked from hem to collar. "When he has that going," she said to her son, "you should borrow a stick to light ours."

Barrus snapped, "I'm not an idiot, Mother."

The landlady laughed. "Maybe not, but you could fool some people, boy. Now, none of your sass to me, understand? Or all of you will be out in the street.

"Our lodger, I was going to say, pays us by the month. But sometimes the only time we see him is when he pays."

"The very time," Thyme remarked tartly, "when so many are invisible."

The landlady laughed again. "And don't I know it! Still, you can't help wondering where he goes and what he does."

A feeble flame flickered beside Thyme's tinder, darkening the white wood before it dwindled and disappeared. "Does he share supper with your family?" He blew on the bright embers and fanned them with his hand.

She nodded knowingly. "Sometimes. Mutton tonight, like I told you."

Barrus said, "It's burning right now, I bet."

"It'll keep, boy. Besides, I want to see if you three need anything more before I go down to look at it. I don't climb the steps more than I have to." She was short and stout.

"More blankets," Barrus said bitterly. "And more firewood."

"There aren't any more blankets. You can spread your coat on your bed,

the same as we do. And if you want any more wood, boy, you'll have to fetch it yourself – I'm not carrying another stick up here. Come along, and I'll show you where it is."

The child spread chilled fingers before Thyme's tiny blaze. "What do you think?"

"I think it will catch that smallest log now," Thyme told her. "Though it would be better if we had more tinder."

"About her lodger, Father Thyme. You know everything."

The old sage shook his head. "I *find out* everything," he said, "sooner or later. But I don't know everything. A fellow that rents a room and uses it only now and then? That's a rich man who wants someplace to go when he's not where he usually is. We'll learn more at supper."

And so they did. There were two sober tinkers who rented a room together, as well as themselves and the meager man who had helped them locate the lodging, and the landlord and landlady. The meager man asked clever questions of the tinkers until he learned that neither had left the city since he had last seen them. Then he turned to Thyme to ask about their travels.

"Over the mountains." Thyme took a pair of potatoes from the big blue bowl that the landlord handed him. "And it was the making of the boy, but the destruction of my daughter, or nearly."

"Bad weather there," their landlord allowed. His good wife gave him a long look, and he added, "Or so I've heard. I can't say I've ever been there."

The child peered into her chipped plate, which was still empty.

"It was worse here." Thyme tried to pass her the potatoes, but was waved away. Barrus took the big bowl. "Not as cold as it was in the mountains, but the rain makes you feel it more."

A worn old woman licked chapped lips in the child's plate, her wavering reflection as dim as her dead eyes.

"Of course, the war made everything ten times worse." An earthenware ladle drowned the dim woman in greasy mutton gravy.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the meager man muttered. He and Thyme talked for some time; he seemed eager to learn everything he could about both armies.

"Will there ever be peace?" the child asked them.

"When we win," their landlord said loudly. Hasty for his favor, the two tinkers banged the battered tabletop with their spoons.

Without speaking loudly, the meager lodger managed to make himself heard above the uproar. "Our emperor has pledged a rich reward for anyone who advises him on how peace may be achieved."

"Then your emperor is a wise man," Thyme told him. To the child, Thyme's tones seemed changed, as if an occult knowledge added weight now to words she did not wholly understand.

"And that is pleasant news for us," Thyme continued. "For we've come here expressly to see him."

Their landlady looked happy to hear it. "You may have to wait quite a while," she said, "if that's what you've come for. We don't often see him ourselves. We can give you your rooms for a week, for five times the daily rent."

"That's kind of you." Thyme tasted a piece of brown bread before laying it on his plate and larding it with a ladleful of the gray gravy. "I think you mentioned something of that sort while we were getting the fire started."

"About the rent?"

"About the emperor. You mentioned you didn't see him much."

"I don't remember that," she said.

"Then I was mistaken." Thyme turned from her to look at her lodger. "It was you she was speaking of, perhaps."

"Perhaps it was." The lodger pushed away his plate. "I don't want to take the time of the whole company, but if you could come to my room after dinner, I might be able to advise you about the best ways of getting a glimpse of our emperor, though he doesn't appear in public often."

"I've finished now." Thyme took the napkin from his lap and laid it beside his knife. "I see you're finished as well."

"Your poor daughter hasn't eaten much."

Thyme nodded. "True, but her appetite will be better tomorrow, I think."

The landlord laid a hand on his arm. "No bread pudding? My wife's bread pudding's quite famous."

The two tinkers looked ready to laugh with pure pleasure. "All the more for us," said the smaller. "I'll take the old man's," added the taller.

The child stood up, scraping back her chair. "May I come with my father?" she asked softly.

The meager man began, "Possibly —"

"She must." Thyme took her in tow. "Now what about you, Barrus? Which will it be, peace or pudding?"

"We don't have peace today," the landlady put in. "They're a bit tough, so far into the season."

"Then I'll take pudding," Barrus said sullenly.

"And we will see you later." Thyme led the child to the stair. "It will be on the floor below ours, I suppose."

The lodger nodded as he slipped past them. "I'll have to unlock the door."

"You are fortunate," Thyme told him when they were seated inside. "Our rooms have no locks. Of course, we've little to leave in them when we go."

The meager man smiled mischievously. "I'm afraid I enjoy frustrating our good hostess."

"She's the sort who snoops through drawers? I suppose so; she seems the kind of woman who would."

The meager man nodded. "Yet there are others who discover more secrets, without spying."

"True," Thyme told him. "And kind men who repent of their kindness when they find that others are clever."

"If you know my secret," the meager man said seriously, "you also know that I have means of silencing those who know secrets."

"Which need not be used in this case." Thyme rose and went to the window, where he stood staring out at the smoking chimney pots of Zant.

"I'm glad to hear that."

"My daughter and I will leave your city in the morning. In a day or two, we will have left its empire. I will not speak; nor will she, I assure you."

Bewildered, the child stared from Thyme to the meager man and back. "Please," she said. "What are you two talking about?"

Thyme turned. "The emperors of Vert trace their line from the first emperor for twenty generations," he said softly. "It is not so here in Zant. Here emperor has deposed emperor, till at last one who was well liked was murdered in a manner so foul that the people would not consent to his murderer's coronation. They chose another general in his place, a hero of humble birth who had risen through the ranks and was famous for his courage." Thyme glanced toward the meager man as he finished speaking, a charged gaze that told the child much more than his mere words.

"I understand – I think."

The meager man made a little motion of impatience. "Yes, I'm the Yellow Emperor. How did you know? Give me a simple, straightforward answer, please."

"I had your picture." From the burse at his belt, Thyme took a copper coin. "When we were going over the mountains, I stole some clothes for the boy."

"From my dead soldiers?"

"Yes. A few had a little money, which I thought might be useful in Zant. I confess I did not know how useful. When the Increate is with anyone,

there rises a tide that bears into its harbor any ship that carries him.”

“Millions of people have these coins.”

“You asked me for a simple, straightforward answer,” Thyme reminded the emperor.

“Give me your subtle and complex answer, then.”

“Not terribly subtle, I fear. Nor terribly complex. It is true that millions have such coins, and yet do not know you when they pass you in the street; but that is only because they cannot conceive that they might encounter someone so exalted someday – someone who holds the power of life and death over every one of them. I know otherwise; there is someone who holds the power of being or unbeing over me, and I shall encounter that someone at the end of Thyme. Thus I understand that such meetings are not impossible.”

The child smiled. “Isn’t he wonderful?”

“Indeed he is,” the emperor admitted. “It was nothing that I said?”

“Nothing specific,” Thyme told him. “But our hostess had told us you seldom use the room you rent from her. My daughter asked me about it, and I indicated to her that you were perhaps a man of some wealth, and not what you seemed. You could have been a highwayman, but you lacked the blustering ways and impressive physique those fellows use to overawe their victims. You had the manners of a gentleman, without the arrogance that is often conferred by birth – we had been with Prince Patizithes in Vert, and so my recollection of that sort of arrogance had been refreshed.”

“I see.”

“When you questioned me at our meal, my first thought was that you were a spy – an agent of the emperor’s, or of whoever gathers facts for him; but such a spy would have been much more interested in the enemy’s army than in his own. I asked myself who might have an equal interest in each. A general kept in the capital, perhaps, but such a general could not appear as a poor man in a place where rooms were let to lodgers. Then I recalled that the emperor had been a general, and that an emperor can do as he chooses. So I looked at the coin.”

The child ventured a very small sound.

“Yes?” the Yellow Emperor inquired.

“Sir – sire – I thought emperors just sat on their thrones. In the palace.”

“On occasions of state, I do,” the emperor acknowledged. “But here in Zant, the occasions of state are as few as I can make them. Quite frankly, there are too many other things I have to do.”

“But isn’t it dangerous?”

“Just yesterday,” the Yellow Emperor explained, “I learned of a plot to kill

me as I slept. So you see it's less dangerous here than sleeping in my palace. More than a few of our august emperors have died in their beds, although not many were either old or ill. I find out everything that's going on in Zant this way, and that's a great deal less dangerous than not knowing."

He paused, his pale fingers fumbling the worn arms of his chair as he watched the child's face. "Now may I ask what your business was with Prince Patizithes?"

Spreading her hands helplessly, the child turned to Thyme, but he sat silent until she found her own anguished answer: "He let me talk to his father about peace. And he was my lover, at least for one night."

The emperor nodded. "Neither actually surprises me much. Your father said something about peace to the boy, and you're still a beautiful woman. This was some years ago, I take it?"

"No, only a few days –"

"Yes," Thyme told him.

"Perhaps fifteen years or so?"

"Yes," Thyme said a second time.

"I see." The emperor sighed. "They have a certain look about them, all that line. They're all a bit inbred, of course. I'm sorry, madame, but I can't permit you to take your son out of my domains. He's too valuable to me – too valuable even now, while Patizithes is still alive. If the prince dies, he'll be invaluable."

"If he will bring peace . . ."

"He *may* bring victory," the emperor explained. "Or at least assist it."

"And after the victory, will there be peace?"

"Of course. And I will be a generous conqueror, you may trust me for that. Why, if – ah –"

"Barrus," she supplied.

"If Barrus proves a faithful vassal, he may well wind up on the throne of Vert. The Easterners would be more docile with someone of their own royal family to rule them, no doubt."

The child felt that she was choking, but she said, "Then you may keep him. Please – will you remind him, sometimes, of his mother?"

"I will," the emperor answered. "I pledge my word to it."

"Father. . . ?"

"You have done well," Thyme told her. "Is that what you wished to ask me?"

His child shook her head. "No. In Vert you said that Vert might win when its men wore yellow clothes. Barrus will have a yellow uniform, I suppose. Is that what you meant?"

"Perhaps. Or part of it."

The emperor arose, strode across the room, and stared into Thyme's eyes. "You're a prophet! A sage! I should have known. And I take pride in my penetration – bah! What was it you meant? The whole of it."

Thyme told him; and late on the following morning, when the rain had at last relented, and long after the cock crowed, Thyme and the charmed child set forth from that tottering, high house, and the strait old street in which it stood, and the gilded gate of Zant itself.

While they walked, the child chirped, "I know this is very foolish, Father Thyme, but do you know I feel so happy! When I think back about it, I've felt sadder and sadder the whole time I've been with you. Now I'm happy again."

The old sage shrugged, and stroked his snowy whiskers, and whispered, "Such is life, child. Child, life is such."

So they proceeded, long league upon long league, the child chattering of the fields and flowers they passed, some pleasant pastures and their curious cattle. By the well-built bridges of the West they crossed its rushing rivers, the rivers that grind gold from their swirling sands. Soon they saw again the mighty mountains, standing like the walls of the world.

At first, the climbing child feared for her hoary father, feeling him too feeble to face their steep scree and perilous paths; but Thyme seemed to straighten with every step, and the snowy beard he had brought to Zant grew grayer and grayer from glance to glance. Once they were waylaid by a brutal bandit who threatened them, frightening the child with a fusil. Thyme took it from him and grappled him to the ground. Only one rose, and the two went on.

One morning, while they walked through a thicket of mountain laurels, the child lagged behind to look at them; for it seemed to her that some bore bright golden blossoms, and she had never seen laurels like them. Soon she found that the flowers belonged not to the trees, but to twining vines that choked them as they climbed. The child traced one down a trunk, ready to cut it at the root; but it grew from the eyes of a yellowing skull. She gasped and backed away.

"That is the trumpet vine," Thyme told her. "And that skull you saw once wore a green cap. Did you poke about the roots of the tree as well?"

In silent horror, she shook her head.

Thyme thrust aside the thick, tangled thorns with his stick, bent, and brought up a bone in a matted mass of mould. "Here is the rib of one who once wore yellow. You see, he has turned his coat, even though he has lost

the back on which he used to wear it." Gay green moss had indeed wrapped the rib.

The child sighed, and sat herself upon a stone. "This is that place, isn't it? This is the pass where we saw the armies fight. I should have remembered it sooner, but then we were up there." Her eyes sought the spot along the snow line.

"Yes," old Thyme agreed. "This is the place."

"You said if each side tried to be more like the other, there might be peace. That's what you told the emperor."

The sage did not sit (for Thyme rarely rests). "What you say is so, child. During the long years in which I have ringed Urth, I have seen that the more nation differs from nation, the difficult it is for one to trust another. Thus I advised each empire to make itself more like its foe. Alas, they were too much alike already. Each saw my advice not as a road to peace, but as ruse to win. The master of the green armies who rejected my counsel so rudely did so only that I might not guess what he planned; and the Yellow Emperor dressed legions in green only that they might not be fired upon as they advanced."

The child shivered. "And now the laurels war with the vines."

The old man nodded a struck a tree trunk (or perhaps the trumpet vine that twined it) with his staff. "I have changed their uniforms," he said. "But only they could halt their war."

Thus they came to green Vert, that great city, the Boast of the East; there they saw soldiers in argent armor standing guard at its gates, and a silver flag flying above the battlements of the bartizan. They did not stop. A gay girl the charmed child left the great green city, lissome and long-limbed, bright of eye and black of hair; but while she walked home with Thyme she dwindled, until such young men as they met on the way no longer stared but smiled. And ere old Urth turned her fair face from the sun, Thyme set her upon his shoulders.

Small and sweet and soiled she was when their long walk was ended at a place where pease had rolled hither and thither across the road.

"Goodbye for now," Thyme told her. "You may play with these pease, for the present."

"Goodbye for now, Father Thyme," she said. "I love pease."

"As do we all." Thyme took up his staff. "But it is so late in the season."

She was picking up her pease when her fond brother, Barrus, found her. "I love you," the child cried, and threw her chubby arms about him.

He fended her off, as boys believe they must, fighting not to let his love

into his voice. "You're a very bad girl," he mumbled, and led her back to their mother's house.

Often afterward she talked of Thyme, until at last her dear mother declared she must have seen the ghost of her grandfather, who had died that day. But though Thyme walked with her always, as he walks over all the world, his adopted daughter did not see him again; and this is his story.

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YOU are of us and you remember it in your dreams. Your nightmares are of sharks (our sharks – the ones we also fear) sharks that look up at you from below with cruel little eyes, or you dream great waves (the waves we also fear) coming closer. At first it seems so slowly that you almost think you might have time to run up the beach to higher ground, but that's not true and you wake up screaming (like we used to scream) not knowing what it is you are afraid of, just knowing this nameless thing that keeps coming and coming, having turned into a wave of fear rather than fear of a wave, and so it is with us, also, a wordless fear, for we have no word for it, only cries and whistles that mean danger. But you have your good dreams, too, as we do, of floating as though you fly. Also you like to make love in the water.

When your children, as our children, have water, they need no other plaything. Your lakes are ringed with houses, your beaches are always full at the seasons for it. Ask yourself could any ape dive like you dive and like our People dive? There are places where we, and you, dive down naked, down and down, and not a single lesson except from our big brothers and sisters. We do it sometimes just for the fun of it. This is something to remember, and you do remember it, though not completely.

I say that if those others are your ancestors, then you would go on vacation to the trees because those others never cared about the water. And then your children would be climbing up and hanging in the highest branches by one arm and swinging around, and even the old people would get a kick out of getting up on some high limb instead of standing in the shallows or sitting on the beach. When it was smart and cool enough to hang around in the trees, we did do that, and when the future was on the beach, we found out about it and we went there and did that and all that went with it. Those others that stayed in the trees (what trees were left) the trees made them what they have become just as the beaches changed us, made us and made you as

you are, crying seal tears as we do, but those others never do.

So (and including That One, then) we are the ones that are your ancestors, and (except for That One, then) we are as hairless as you are, no more, no less. You might be surprised. Sisters and brothers to the hippopotamus and not ashamed of it.

In those days, before That One came, we would never tease a manatee. We called them friends and swam with them as well as with seals and walruses.

Those were good days. Every family had its bay and some People slept where the rocks hung over. They had a good spot. It was so cool there sometimes they even came out of the water to play on the beach before the sun went down.

But usually our children come on into the water with us in the morning and don't leave again until dusk. The littlest ones float around grasping our long, long hair, and, if the older ones come out of the sea in the day time, it's most often so as to jump into it again from some high rock. So everybody has a lot of fun and stays cool. If one of us waits long enough to snatch at a fish, it's only because we are tired of easier things to eat like clams and muscles and periwinkles.

Some of you may think we have no names, but we do though for a while I didn't have one, but everybody knew who I was even so, and I knew who they were whether they had a name or not. And when we saw That One, we knew who he was, though at first we didn't. Some of us have swum far and been told tales of others not like we are and wondered how such people could be and laughed about them that they had hair on their bodies as, at first, we laughed at That One for the same reason and for other reasons, too.

There's a place where we go and steal berries from the Berry People. They have one over there with big feet with six toes and big hands with six fingers. (Those people are always the fastest swimmers. We have People like that over on our shore and we always call them Toes. We like that funny name. We have two Toes now, Old Toes and Little Toes.) The one over there is called Deep Diver for two reasons. Sometimes he's just called with a gesture that means sex so his name is also Middle Finger even though he doesn't have a middle finger. That's another good funny thing. They say he wanted to mate with me, but this was before That One came and changed everything.

But I was thinking maybe Deep Diver will be glad to see me this year because I'm much, much fatter than I was at berry time last year. I have come, now, into my good fat and I will – but this is what I think before That One comes – Yes, I will go into the water with him. His eyes are as blue as

the many, many eyes of the blue eyed clam and as beautiful. We'll be like two big fish together, and I think about a child hanging on to my hair.

Ma says, In the beginning this is how it always was, ma and child, ma and child, and this is how it always will be, though if a storm lasts a long time, then let the child be swept off the beach back into the sea that gave it, for children come from water. They creep inside while you're making love, so, if a big storm that's the sign that you should let the child be taken back.

The land away from the beach is not good. Nothing to eat there but a few small things. Here the sea takes care of us and washes up to us all that we ask for. He was a land man, That One, but even he didn't like the land. He was glad to get where we are and chew on our conchs.

There are a lot more places and times in the world than this one, Old Man Lost Egg says, and not just once or twice, that once we were the very best of the best of the best of the tree people, and, in that other time, we came to the water because our trees died. Once, he says, we liked the sun. That was a strange season, nodding to her, then, instead of towards the water, but the sun changed and then the sea took us in and made us happy, and gave us all our friends and relatives and all the little soft things to eat and shells to put things in and to blow into. It's the sea, Old Man Lost Egg says, that goes on almost forever even as we stand here on the edge of it. This is also true of the land, so there will be many more times and places and a time also for you. Old Man Lost Egg has heard all this by listening into conch shells.

He got his name from first being Old Man Lost Leg, but Lost Egg is a lot funnier, so we call him that. He only lost a little bit of his leg. On land he moves like a seal, but in the water he's just like everybody else.

Other men do not grow old except for Old Man Lost Egg and Old Oyster. We used to call Old Oyster The-Man-With-Seal-Lady, because he had a seal for a friend but That One killed Seal Lady so we call Old Oyster Old Oyster now. It's a good joke, as though he had an oyster for a friend.

Those days lots of us had seals for brothers and sisters and swam with them or lay with them, on cooler days, out on the rocks.

That One killed Seal Lady. Old Man Lost Egg says it comes from living too much on the land which is full of emptiness. That One killed one of us, too, but before that he killed Seal Lady and ate her.

We had not seen anything like That One so we watched and thought how thin and hairy, and how hot he must be, out on the land. We were not surprised that such a creature would do strange things and would kill Seal Lady. It was hard to keep from laughing even so because he moved so much like People move, yet not, and because he had so many things hang-

ing about him and his penis was almost as small as one of the tree people's, though we've not seen that, only heard tell of it. That made us laugh, and his feet like hands.

He's not happy in his fur, shaking himself and dripping and even sitting in the sun to dry himself after he washed. His hands are almost just like ours, only a little hair on the backs but smooth in front though ours have more skin between the fingers.

He calls that hot stuff, fie. I was the one he told first. But he calls everything by its wrong name, and, anyway, we don't need that stuff because we already have water. By the time he told me, fie, he had a few of the right words for things.

He killed Uncle in just one second, so fast nobody was sure how he did it.

That One would rather stay over there with the Rocks-Hanging-Over People because of the shade, but they throw stones at him every time he comes near so he has to stay with us. Those Rock People know something about him we don't know, but they won't tell us because what he did was too bad to talk about.

We were wondering how he has any fun if he kills Seal Lady people or Uncle, but maybe he didn't mean to do it, maybe something strange happened, but, to come upon him then made us feel like watching from a distance and we wondered what would happen to him after he had eaten some of Seal Lady, but he only went down to the damp, cool sand and dug a little sleeping pit and went to sleep almost the same way we always do. It was in the morning that Uncle was dead, and those who saw it said it was a flash from the eye. They said That One has an eye to watch out for. that no one should look him in the eye, but others said it was a flash from the finger or the penis, and others said it was a rock, like we do sometimes, though we always miss.

"I come from the only place there really is," he said. (This was after he began to talk with us.) But I could see that the place now was this place because he and I were both here in it and the other place could only be told about, and I said so, and I asked him which of the four corners of the world it was and which of the twelve times that have been and are to be, but he only laughed. I was glad I had made him laugh. That's a hard thing to do.

Sometimes he says he comes from beyond the sun but Old Man Lost Egg says that nothing is beyond the sun except that one woman, Sun Ma, who hides behind it peeking out at us. Old Man Lost Egg has seen her.

Like a baby, That One learns to speak and to swim at the same time.

I keep thinking that I'll go out and see if Deep Diver will be with me, except I'm busy teaching That One. I'm the one to do it because the other

women won't go near him. They say he has walked on the land too much and the sun has looked at him in a bad way. I know they're right about that, but I feel for him as if he's my little brother. I have no little brother so who do I have to be it? But perhaps I feel this because I'm the only one who heard him cry.

We cried. We cried like young seals, first for Seal Lady and then when the other uncles took Uncle out to where the rip-tide runs between the islands so he could be carried away to another time and place. Everybody had a turn holding Uncle in their arms to take him out there. Everybody had a chance to swim with him one last time. And later, That One cried to himself in the night. Perhaps about Uncle. I heard the crying in spite of the waves. We didn't let That One sleep near us, but I was on the edge and heard and I came and put my hand on him like we do to a young seal that's lost its mother. No one, whether of the land or not, should have to cry in the night without a touch from some other creature. Strange, though, he didn't have any tears. I thought to lick them away, but there were none.

That One says he has a name, and that the name says that he's coming and to move out of his sky. And he says that he is the head man's son of the head man's son of the head man's son, as if Old Man Lost Egg had many sons of sons of sons which isn't possible because Old Man Lost Egg's son was taken away by a shark and his other son also something of the sort. Besides, we are not so sure of sons except for the six toed ones who swim so fast. Most of our sons, anyway, belong to the brothers of their mothers. After he heard that, he said he was the head uncle's son of the head uncle's son, and so on and on, but I said I wouldn't call him by any such name and I have already forgotten it.

It was that same day one of my big brothers began to walk crab-wise along the beach and we began to laugh and do it, too. And then the men began to shout and to dare the land and they ran into it until you couldn't see them anymore even from the highest place. And we women worried, but we laughed anyway, because what else was there to do? And we tried to guess who would come home last, and pretty soon everybody came back. Nobody got lost out there that time. And they jumped into the water from the highest place like they were children and then we all did that. That was also the day that That One said pretty soon he would dare the land and the sea both, but he didn't even dare to jump into deep water from the high place. We hid our smiles behind our hands like we do so as not to hurt the feelings of young seals or children. I have come to know him as if he were my own child, I, holding his chin up as he learns to swim. He holds my hair and I swim him out and in, up and down. I run my hand

over the coarse fur of his back. It feels funny. He's such a strange "child:" keeps his strings and stones and things in a hole in the rocks while he learns to swim, is always frightened. I see it in his eyes – strange eyes, the color of the sky at night, while ours are the color of the sky in the daytime. His are always frightened, as though every day was a stormy day and every night was a waiting for the big wave, the one that comes suddenly with no warning. I laugh to myself to think he said he would dare the land and the sea both.

Then one of those biggest things of all the living things comes out to die on the beach like they always do, out on Berry Island. Deep Diver came over and told us and said that we could go over and have some of that fat. The People of the overhanging rock place come, too, and so does That One. By that time he can swim well enough to go. I said there was no need, but he said there was a need, and he puts on all his strings and things and comes.

It is just as Deep Diver said, a dead, largest-one-of-all is on their beach. We were sad for the big, playful thing. What a lot of playfulness, all gone now. Such a big thing needs a lot of crying even though it wasn't a special friend, so we do that first.

The Berry People use some sharpened shells and some of that shiny-black rock and begin to make holes so as to give each of us our share, but That One stops them. He tells them he wants to do this his way, that he has a special reason and, since he is the son of the son of the son of many head uncles, we should let him, and, even though here is someone who can just barely swim and can't catch a fish at all no matter how hard he tries, and who still doesn't know all the words for things, they let him because he has a knife almost as sharp as the black stone blades and larger and stronger. That's the stick he keeps tied to him that's usually covered up and that we thought he had – before we knew it opened to a knife – we thought he had because his penis was too small. "Let him do the work, then." Everybody says it, and most of us go out to pick berries which are beginning to get ripe. But the Berry People sit on the beach and watch him cut into the big happy thing to make sure everybody gets a nice share.

I go with Deep Diver. (We usually mate with the People of the beach of the big stone, but there isn't anybody over there for me, and, anyway, I like Deep Diver best of all.) He says how nice and fat I've grown. He wants to be with me in the water. I say it isn't the time yet, though I say that's what I want to do, and soon, too.

When the tide creeps into me as we mate, I know that if I do it with Deep Diver I might have one like him with six toes, because the tides come

into the ma by way of the male so that something of the male is let into a ma along with the tide that washes the child in. (Sometimes you can see the babies waiting in the bubbles of the foam.) I want big children like he is so that my sons can be big uncles and the sons of my daughters also. I tell Deep Diver I will keep a little-finger shell, or even two, near me the whole time I'm with child so as to make sure it will come out like him, but, of course, none of this will happen and instead my child will be almost as thin as That One, though not as hairy.

This is the time when That One made the thing he called his bowawa. We don't need things like that. He made it out of that big skin. He stays out there in the berry land and cuts and cuts for many days, and gives away all the good parts. What he eats himself he won't eat unless it has been changed by that stuff he calls "fie." We make a song and dance about it: the "fie, fie, fie, fee, fup, fup," dance and we sing it almost every night out there. The Berry People have six good conchs to blow into so they do that while we sing and clap.

Out there visitors have to sleep in the pools on the rocks. They only have one small beach and they keep that for themselves. That One doesn't like it because he wakes up choking in the water sometimes. I have to sleep in the same pool with him and help him up in the middle of the night as though he's still tiny. In some ways he hasn't grown up at all from the very beginning and yet he always wants to tell everybody what to do. The others wonder why I stay near him and help him. They say he should be let die by his own clumsiness but I like his strangeness and the funny things he tells about. I like to wonder about him and who he is and where he comes from. I know it's not from beyond the sun, but I know it's not from around here either.

That One thinks the dance and song we made is all about him because he's so great and brought us fie which we don't even use and don't even want to. It's too hot. We don't say he's wrong about that song and dance, but we put in some new words he doesn't know and that we'll not tell him, about how it's worth sand. We sing, "fie, fie, fie, and all worth sand and you, too, worth sand," and we come onto the beach and throw sand up like we do sometimes, and People get it in their eyes and have to go back into the water to wash it out even though we're all crying at how funny it is. The first time we sing that song, That One stands up and swings his arms around, and the second time we do it he stands on a high place and says that this is right for us to do for him, but that we shouldn't laugh so much. Well, why do it if not to laugh?

I brought him berries. That made him smile. He's so hard to make smile sometimes I think that's another reason why I stay around with him, just

to see if I can do such a hard thing. He said he didn't know we had berries, and I said, "You're glad we do." He looked happy while he was eating them. That was the first time I thought he had a nice face even though it looks so funny.

I'm becoming a talker (which is what I do become). It all starts with That One telling things to me and me telling things to him. So, in the future, I will be telling everybody all about it so it will be known that all that happened is happening.

He puts together that big skin and bones of the biggest thing of all in a different way than they were before, and when he's done he tells me I'm part of the plan and that I have to do it with him.

"You'll be Zuesa's woman. You'll be above all the other mas. There's no word in your language for what I'll make you. There'll even be stars named after you."

I say, no. No is a word not to say, but I say it. (If ma is the first word, then no is the last, or so we always say.) I'm glad none of the others hear me say it.

Then he says (and it isn't the first time) that I and we all should call him Zuesa and not call him That One anymore. This is his real name which is the name of one so big that we don't have a word for it yet because we're not that far advanced, but we change Zuesa to Zand for sand and to Zat One and to Zeaweed, and we're glad we have so many new things to laugh about. Then he says this berry place will be called Zuesa's beginning because this will be where he starts from, bringing fie and bowawa and many other good things to the whole world. So we mustn't call it Berry Place anymore. But we decide that we'll just point to it and laugh. We'll not call it anything, and everybody will know exactly where we mean.

Now he stands on the hill and tells us things we already know. The world is round – as round as the moon, but that can be seen by any child who has gone from swim to walk and can stand on a high place and look out from it. It's a very large circle. We all know that. We don't talk about it, we just know it – that we live here on a round place like on the moon, just as he says.

I tell him to stop talking. (This is after all that talk.) I brush his funny belly hair with my hand. As I do it, I see Zat One's little penis come out and up. I'm just playing with his belly hair and not thinking about going into the water with him or with anybody and he turns and, almost before I know what he's doing, it's done already. I had not given him my cowery, and there it is, done, and so fast. My first time and no laughing. Done from behind, too, like lizards do, like bugs, no looking eye to eye, no swimming around no laughing – not even smiling.

But Zat One is very happy. "You'll be the first mother of the men of fie," he tells me. "There'll be lots, but you'll be the first and you'll be above all the others." Then he turns to do the thing again and from the back again, but I go off into the water, too far for him to follow.

This is the beginning of all the bad things.

Out there with the Berry People there are three women that are not pregnant yet, Like me, they have come into their full fat. And there are two girls that are just beginning to get into their fat time though they have their moons at the full of the moon like the rest of us. One dawn, when the bowawa is already finished and sits on the sand with some shells full of berries in it, I hear a great noise of brothers and uncles and Deep Diver is with them. They come to me to say it's all my fault, that I let Zat One be here and then this happened, and I say, What? And they say every one of their women that were ready for it. He has been with them and not even in the water and not even laughing and not even just one, but all, and in that single night, and he did it in such a way that they hardly even knew it had happened. Then they throw stones at me and at Zat One. "Don't be here anymore," they tell me. "You and Zat One also. You both go."

Zat One says that now I have to come with him or they'll hurt me but he has done a very, very bad thing, and I'm thinking it's true the land is a bad place to have made him like he is. I say, no, and, no, again, but all the time I'm running with him because I don't know what else to do. I know my People don't mean for me to go away forever, but I know I should go for a while so they have a chance to forget some of this. Zat One and I push the bowawa off the sand and jump into it and they don't swim out after us. They just begin to laugh a lot. They watch us go off this funny, slow way, wobbling in the waves. I have to laugh, too, in spite of what's been happening. And that's not the only funny thing about it. Zat One has made two things of skin, two little moons he stuck on each end of a big bone. He waves these around and makes them be the arms of the bowawa so it can go along. I lie there in it laughing and laughing and I can hear the people on the beach laughing, too, even though they're angry, and I think what Old Man Lost Egg says sometimes that, well, it's done so it's done, so if you can laugh, might as well do it, so I do it, and I hear those others doing it too.

We go right on past my beach. I feel like getting out and swimming back home to be there when they all get back from Berry Island. I think maybe when they come with that nice fat and those berries mixed into it, they will have forgotten all this a little bit but Zat One says to wait and I'll be glad I did, but I doubt it. He says not to forget I'll be the mother of the men of fie, but I don't even like fie and I tell him so. I know how to make it now.

It's no big thing, and I can't think of a time I would ever want to do it. Besides, it used up that good stuff that the sea washes up to us. I do stay there with him, though, but for a different reason. The water is humping up and I can smell the wind coming. He can't see that or smell it. He goes on talking and pushing the bowawa along in that funny way. I stay because I don't think this bowawa will be very good when the waves get big, and I know, if I'm not there with him, Zat One will surely die. He's not a good Person, if Person at all, but is he so bad I shouldn't help him? So I let us pass my home beach, but I think I'll swim back to it as soon as they will be glad to see me there. I think Zat One can't last very long anyway even with me staying. Nobody likes him. I'm the only one that wonders about him and helps him. All he knows is what I taught him and there hasn't been time to tell everything. So I go on, watching after him like he is my little one, and he is my little one.

ZUESA

Where I come from, giants rule. generations of princes, lords, barons, sitting in the royal setting on tree limbs that represent ten thousand warriors, all the leaders having swung down via private chutes or air bridges of their own suspending, having entered through the sky gates of the messengers of good tidings, all, feathered like sun birds, swinging princely arms as far as is allowed and sometimes even farther, and I, one of them, my arms raised, I, permitted to take my place at the topmost royal hearth when the fires burn brightest. Now all gone, my master hat tossed from my head, my strings – except for these colorless copies – slashed; even access to any tree, whether figurative or real, impossible to me. Except there are trees. That, the captains surely didn't know. They thought the land too hot and dry. Uninhabitable, they said, and left me here because it was uninhabitable. A little circle of green around the edges of the poles, and, on purpose, they didn't drop me off at either one. I'm to suffer. And I have suffered: eaten disgusting fish-things, chewed seaweed, sucked at things I couldn't chew or swallowed them whole – I can't get that sea-taste out of my mouth. Even the eggs taste of the sea – thought many times I'd not be able to take one more breath of this hot air, nor another step across the desert, but I've seen a giant, dried up trunk on one of the beaches – a trunk almost large enough to be one of our own. It would have taken five men with outstretched arms to gird it. I've eaten steaks bigger than they ever knew existed. sea mammal steaks. I've had berries sweet as tree-top blossoms. Out of this world I'll build a new one, half me, half these things that swim. The best revenge will be to bring it about. I'll call the planet Zuesa so, if

they ever come back they'll know this all came from me.

It's clear these once were land creatures. As far as I can tell, all the mammals here were also, at one time, of the land, but they've gone back to the beaches and into the oceans. The land got too hot. Under these circumstances it'll be hard to make a decent civilization.

Can there be such a thing as a civilization without trees?

That's always been the question and I've heard those captains debating it, crouched under their crowns. After all, the trees made us what we are. There was a time when we had shelters of slabs of bark tied about our nests of leaves. There was a time when we counted nuts and fruits and packaged them in tree pods and made strings of fibers in order to make the knots which we used to count the packages, so the stuff of the trees was the beginning of everything. "From the gods of the forest," as they used to say, but no trees here that I've seen except for that one old log washed ashore from gods know where. Only that one, as though a sign of hope to me, and I do hope. It pleases me to think that somewhere, far north or far south, there is a forest of giants almost as big as the giants of home and that, one day, I might be able to stretch my arms again and swing and leap and sleep to the rocking of the wind instead of the rocking of the waves.

I will go north and create a new civilization. It won't be easy with these creatures. You'd think life was all play the way they go about giggling. She, too, laughs too much. Even so, I think of her as my sister-wife. I call her that because, in times to come, my sons will have to marry their sisters, otherwise my genes would get lost. My ideal is for a much thinner People, certainly with fur, but as tall as these-creatures are, and with great, showy penises continually exposed, as theirs are, so that when my captains come back, if they come back – I must keep in mind they may never see any of this – but if they do, they'll get the same shock I did. Here will be Zuesa's men of fire, all with my face, all with the hats and crowns of their status and all with enviable penises.

Ah, but she . . . I'll call her sister, but I'll also call her by my mother's name just to be able to say that word again and to remind me how a woman can really be. I mustn't get used to these soft gigglers. I want to remember how a woman can be thin and stringy, with tiny, woodland breasts, black tipped. Had she been a man, my mother would have been a warrior. She was a flier from branch to branch. Lived in the upper reaches. Our house was at the top. Mother hardly ever came down. She liked the sway of things up there. She slept in the highest hammock. Her fur was orange-red. She was like fire herself. That's how I'd like my sons to be, all like her, thin and fiery, phosphorescent eyes glowing out in the night, not

like the pale eyes of these creatures, all the color of the water that they spend their days floating around in.

I taught them . . . I never wanted to be of the teaching caste, but I taught all her group fire. They didn't like it. How can one like or not like a thing like that? I showed them boat, and they said they didn't need that either, though these are all part of progress. Yet I they did sing about me (if you can call that waa waa boo baa singing). They threw up sand and blew into shells. They know my worth even though she's the only one who shows it. The rest are afraid. Though they have no castes, they sense a higher rank in me.

But I do realize how much I need her – just as she is, actually – to help me. If it hadn't been for her, I'd have died for sure in the storm. We lost the boat. At first I thought for good, but she found it. I don't even remember how we got to that beach. I came to myself afterwards when we were already up on the cliff where only the spray from the waves could reach us. More of those creatures were up there, too, waiting out the storm. They don't seem to care how wet they get. None of them, she included, bothered to go up where the spray couldn't reach. I suppose it's that layer of fat that does it. They did huddle together, but it seemed more for friendliness than for warmth. Zoe (she doesn't know yet I've named her that) Zoe did keep me warm, though; held me to her all night long. I was throwing up and shaking. I think I was in shock. Gods, she's big! Like a feathered nest. I sank right in, stopped shaking and slept through it as though I was one of theirs.

In the morning, when those creatures of hers got a good look at me, they didn't much like what they saw, that was clear. Zoe told them we'd go as soon as she found the boat, and she left me there alone with them and went out swimming. (I can't see how they do that – swim off with all kinds of weird fish out there. I got stung when a poison tail whipped me and I saw fish with needle teeth.) The creatures turned their backs to me. I wasn't afraid they'd do anything. I know they throw stones, but they always miss. It got hot as usual. I went part way in to cool off and even then – as usual – I felt so hot I couldn't breath. The young ones came swimming up to me to feel my fur and laugh. They have less fear of me when I'm in the water. That was true with the other pods, too. Those young ones really laughed to see me learning to swim. Even the young are fat and hairless except on their heads.

Zoe said the storm felt like taking me, but changed its mind at the last minute. (I'll not let her say things like that to my children.) She said she would go to see if the storm had decided to take the boat or not. She said she could do it faster by herself. My mother never spoiled me by doing anything of that kind. Mother would say, "Climb up and see for yourself to

your kites and gliders or any hot air toy." (I had all those toys that ride over the tree tops. Mother thought they were good for me, and that was true because I became a great pilot though what good is that now? But I'll write it all down for my sons – for the princes and lords of lightning. Though the first priority is seeding them. Zoe's son will be above them all. It's what these creatures need most, gods and emperors. I, the god, having dropped from the sky, which is true. I really am their gift from the stars. I was thinking all this when the young ones splashed around laughing at me and the adults turned away and covered their smiles, and I thought, go ahead and laugh. You'll soon see.

Then I thought it would be a good idea, when Zoe came back with the boat, if I should try to plant some more sons, two or even three if I could be fast about it. (It's a good thing I'm young and quick and have practiced the "single thrust" method our highest leaders prefer in order to conserve energy for more important tasks and also to conserve energy in order to impregnate as many as possible in the shortest amount of time.) I must pick out the ones not yet pregnant, those with their shells still near them. Zoe could wait for me with the boat all ready to get out of there fast. It always takes those big uncles a while to find out what happened. Even the women don't react that quickly, almost as though they're not sure it happened at all. They're confused when it happens on land, which makes it all the better for my plans.

VENUS

We have to go away again as fast as we can, though not much stone throwing. Those cliff People don't know what to do about us, but I know we should go before they decide something. The bowawa needs to be fixed. We have to find a good stopping place, but first we have to get away. Zat One has me cup the water out as we go. My hands, he says, are made for it. We go along, but not as fast as we could if we were swimming except Zat One can't swim even this fast.

He's smiling at me when he says my hands are good. That's another one of his smiles. I'm counting up maybe one hand's worth in all, but I'm not sure this one belongs with the others. It's not a good smile, so I'm not smiling back at him. "What are you doing," I say, "using up cowerly shell women?" Already I'm not talking any longer like my People talk. I'm talking like he would talk if he could talk as well as we can. I'm asking questions about things that shouldn't be asked about, except things like this didn't happen before Zat One came. "This is a thing to say, no, about." I say. "It should be learned without having to say anything about it," and I

say, "I won't let this happen."

"I have a plan," he says, but I know all those furry children he plans on will be left out for the waves to take. I don't say it, but I think it. Those thin, hairy things won't like the ocean. They will have gotten inside the mas by the way of the air instead of by the way of water as they should get in. The mas won't know what to do with them. They will be given up to the storms and swept away like they should be. But then I think again, and this time I think maybe they should be left out for the land. for the sun to take, or lizards, or anything of the land.

"North," he says, and asks me if I know what that is. Then he tells me, and I see by what he's telling that I do know what north is. It's the second corner of the earth. I tell him that, but he says there are no corners to the earth, but I know that also. Old Man Lost Egg, when he was young, did as the young ones do sometimes. He swam out and around and only came back much later and much older, saying that the world is, in truth, a series of circles, and that it went on and on, and that there were People on good beaches and good rocky places and on islands of stones which they shared with the seals.

Zat One tells me, "We go north," and I say, "I'm not going." I say, "I'll go as far as where you can stop and fix this bowawa but not farther." Then I turn my back and keep on scooping up the water and he jumps on me, again from the back. It's over in the time it takes to scoop a fish. I don't know what to do. I stop scooping out the water so that the bowawa fills up and we have to land in a place that's not a Food place, but we manage it. He climbs half way up the cliff and begins to try to fix the bowawa there on a little ledge. I stay in the water, thinking. I see he watches me. I let myself drift out with the pull of the tide. He calls. I think he's thinking I'm not coming back. I'm thinking the same thing, and thinking he'll die soon without me, but then I think maybe he won't die as easily as I want him to. Maybe he'll go on doing that bad thing and live a long time going on doing it, I think I'll have to be the one to kill him if the sea doesn't do it soon. But then I have a good idea. I swim back. "Come." I say, "we'll find a better place to fix the bowawa."

This time I swim while he Paddles the bowawa along. He's so little and light that the bowawa doesn't fill up so fast as it does when I'm in it since I'm so fine and big. We stay just beyond the surf and I find a tiny beach only big enough for us. Nobody lives there, not even a seal. I'm thinking that here, I'll teach him about life. He'll know a whole new thing. He'll be a real Person and smile a lot and then I'll be able to love him and let myself have this child of the air and land.

He thinks to sit and dry himself, but I tell him to lie down. I tell him it's time for something different and that the land has made him forget himself. "I've heard," I say, "of an uncle who stayed out on the land too long and when he came back the sun was stuck in his eyes so he could hardly see, and stuck inside his thoughts, too."

I start by stroking his belly fur as I did before, but when his penis comes out, I say, "Not yet." I stroke him all over and lick and hold him to my big, round breasts. He plays with the nipples a little and hugs me, but he doesn't do much more than that. He lets me do the playing of it and I gladly do, only he keeps trying to come in from the back all the time. I laugh and stop him and make him follow me into the water. I hold him up and float around with him on top because I know he can't do it as we would do it. I make him come to me face to face, looking into my eyes. I play until he's tired, but I know he likes it. He doesn't laugh like we do, but he likes it. Afterwards he falls asleep with a little half-smile on his face, and I know he never thought things could be like this. I know he's surprised. He didn't know we were as smart as this, but we are, and we also know many other things. Now I'll be able to love him. We can go to the second corner of the world where he'll be cooler and I'll go gladly and help him get there.

In the morning he tells me about wree. He says wree is a very good land thing and there are some up in the second corner. He said we had part of one that had washed up to us. He says wree makes shady places where he can be in it and live there and stretch his arms there like they like to stretch. He tells me about fruwa and kinds of land-leaves that you can eat like we chew on sea lettuces. He says there are places where the land is the best of all possible places. He says when I see wree I will believe him.

After he fixes the bowawa he chips at a stone. He chips until the stone begins to look like me. "This is you," he says. "You are the ma of all the mas, and I like you like I've not liked any other creature here. Don't forget that," he says, "no matter what happens," and I'm thinking he's cured of all the bad things. He's cured because of love. He doesn't know that word, but he has the feeling.

I tell him I love him. I'm not sure about that, but there is a need to say it and it's always better to say it than not because later might be too late, so I do say it.

ZUESA

I should have been working on the boat, but I worked on the stone instead. I needed the rest . the first real rest since they dropped me off here. And this turned out to be a good time to teach her a few things. I told her

about civilization, what it is and how important it is. I told her what she means to me. I confessed that, without her, nothing will come of me at all. I told her how I need to become the big head uncle of all of them, and that I want her to be Big Ma with me. She just laughed, but she really listened when I told her about trees and the climbing stairs and the vines and the kites we ride. I explained about writing and how the trees had given us smooth barks to write on before we invented paper. I told her the trees had given us the ideas for almost everything. This time wasn't wasted because she began to understand things and I saw, also, that she's beginning to love me. She said so. I need her to feel this way. When she almost ran off I realized how lost I'd be.

After spending this sex time on the beach with her, I realized why I'd been able to succeed with the seeding as well as I have. With them, when it comes to sex, they take their time about it. They even consider that a virtue, and I admit they have a point, but one hasn't very often got a whole afternoon not if one is in charge of several others of lower ranks. Even then I had things I should have been doing, yet I let myself rest. I thought maybe one more day of it while I finished the statue, which is part of my plans.

So I sat and carved, and later I began to tell her about my mother. I told her mother could fight almost as well as a man, though I had to use their words "scuffle" and "tussle." They aren't advanced enough to have a word for war or fight that I can tell. I told her I'd never seen Mother cry, even when my brother was brought in so mangled he'd never swing in the trees again, having been beaten in battle (I had, of course, to use their word scuffle) by the men of the lesser trees. Those little trees, I told her, grow in the mountains, which are cliffs like she's never imagined could exist. The trees and we men of the valley are larger. All the valleys have larger men. If one of those mountain men had been left off here, they'd really have had something to laugh about and then she'd have seen how big I am compared to them. I told her I was one of the seventy-two, and that there had been thirteen symbols on my headdress. I told her how red Mother is and how I wanted red sons that were like her so they could be my men of fire. She said they would be beautiful and that sometimes their people also have red hair on their heads, though it's rare. But I said beautiful was not what I wanted my sons to be. I wanted to say, impressive and grand, but I couldn't find the words in their language except uncle or ma of the moon or of the sun. (I thought it ironic that one so huge and so hairless, that one with buttocks like buttocks I'd never seen before, could speak about beauty. And yet I must admit she was looking pretty good to me. I can see a kind of beauty in her odd, sea-colored eyes and in her long hair, also like the sea in

the way it hangs down her back in waves.)

I've begun to write all this out for my sons. I'm using the back of my number codes list. I'll not have any use for that again. First I made an alphabet for them and then addressed them as "conquerors" as well as "your excellencies." Also I've put some writing (the simple, humble form) along the sides of the boat so as to teach my new Zoe. I want the first words she learns to read to be "your excellency."

Tomorrow I'll get back to work. I've rested too long and wasted too much seed and the energy to spend it. I'll sleep turned away.

VENUS

We go, then, in the bowawa, and I sit with him so we can be together in it though I'd rather be swimming. I touch his feet that are there in front of me. I tickle his toes. He looks at me like he cares about me, though he doesn't smile. I'm thinking, his eyes are the color of the bottom of the sea as well as the sky at night, while our eyes are like the sky in the day time. Then he asks me to say that I'll keep his baby son and not let him get swept away.

"Why would I let that happen," I say, "when I love you now?"

"Say anyway," he says. "Cross your arms over your breasts like this and say." And I do it though I don't know why I need to when I already said I wouldn't do it.

This is one of those strange, cloudy days. I can remember the last time I saw a day like this. It was before I became a woman. I'm hoping there might even be a sprinkling like there was that time, and maybe some flowers might come out and we could go into the land and cover our heads with all the yellow we'd want and we'd dance and bugs would come out and dance with us. I tell Zat One about it. I tell him I want him to see such a thing as those flowers which I've only seen twice before and that even Old Man Lost Egg has only seen six times in all his long life. And I tell Zat One about the little bugs that come to hop with us. He says if such a thing happens, maybe he'll go see it, but that he doesn't have time and so maybe he won't. Time, he says, is the most important thing of all and we mustn't waste it, but I think going into the land to see the flowers would be using time well and I remember how Old Man Lost Egg says he would like to see those flowers once or twice more before being taken with the tide, so I hope it will happen again now for him.

We go on and the sky water doesn't come. The clouds go away overhead, but hang a long ways off on the edge of the world circle, out where the sky and sea roll into one thing so it's easy to see that the sea is the low part of the sky and the sky the high part of the sea. I've seen Berry Island,

and other islands, too, float on the sky some mornings and some evenings, too, so that if Zat One comes from the stars, as he says, that isn't so strange, it's just a long way around. It's wree that surprises me – that such a thing like a Giant sea weed could grow also on the land.

After a while we come to another nice beach full of People. Maybe as many as I would count up on hands and feet if I had six toes and six fingers like Deep Diver. We land there. Everybody pretends not to look, but they do anyway, and laugh behind their hands at Zat One, but they look at me, not laughing, for I'm a fine big woman. I'm just what all the People like best, which is why one like Deep Diver wants me and I want him for the same reasons. I never wanted a little furry one like Zat One.

He calls out to them, but they only stare at the clouds that hang in the elbow where the sky rises from the sea. Then Zat One holds up the little ma stone, and they do come,

They've never seen such a thing as a ma to fit in the hand like this one does. Zat One is saying, "This is great ma of the moon and of the sun and I'm her greatest uncle. I'm here to bring you many new things." Then he makes fie and shows them how to do it, but they're like us, they don't care about fie. They like the little ma stone. And then they call me ma, though no one ever called me that except as a joke when I was thin and little and couldn't have been a ma at all.

I tell them that I'm The One with Zat One, and no more than just what they see. Zat One gets angry when I say that, but I think he can't say, no, in front of all these People. But then he does say, no, and not just once. "No, no, no," he says, and in a voice more like a sea gull than a Person. The People turn their faces to the elbow of the sky again, and I see – and I'm sorry for it – that he's counting up the women who are just coming into their fat, and I say, "No," to him, then, so we're two strange People (if Zat One really is a Person) that say, no, to each other.

"I must," he says.

"I will keep you from it," I say.

"This is important. This is what I've been dropped from the sky for."

"This is not a loving nor a playful thing."

"Love has nothing to do with it. I need fie People, and you need them, too."

He's yelling this. The People haven't heard such a thing before except if it's a game. They want to make it into something funny. They begin to dance and throw sand and splash and make an imitation of his yelling and everything gets confused and full of sand so that everybody gets sand in their eyes. During this time I see already he has gone to two young ones just coming into fat. It's as if the anger and confusion make him even faster

and better at it than if things are calm and happy.

Then I'm the one yelling and sounding like a sea gull. I say he's a shark that steals women and right then he's in the middle of having another one. The People don't understand because it's from the back and on land, but then they do see it's true. "Swim him off." I keep yelling it, and I pull at him and he's hitting me. These are real hits. I didn't think he would do such a thing. Then I give the whistle that means shark, which should never, ever be given except when there is a shark. When I do that, one big uncle comes with a stone and hits Zat One on the head as though to open a clam. I've not seen this done to a Person before, nor to any seal or any such thing. Zat One takes that thing, like his finger that he wears on those strings he has. He kills that big uncle in one of those flashes. All the People step away, then, except for me. I'm still trying to pull Zat One away from there. Another big uncle comes, but I can see he doesn't know what to do. Before he can think of something, there's another flash and he's down, too. After that Zat One is running to the bowawa, pushing off and going on as fast as he can make it go. They're telling me to get away from their beach, too, so I go. I follow him but not near. He calls but I don't come. He's calling, "Zoe, Zoe," which he's been calling me now, but I don't want to be reminded of that land ma he was telling about. I don't care about her.

Pretty soon I see him do a strange thing. He passes by an island and there's an otter lady lying on her back in the water near it. She has her little white, fuzzy baby resting on her chest. Zat One floats over there slowly as if he thought she would swim away, but she's not afraid. Why should she be? She probably plays with those People from that last beach. She might even trade babies with those mas sometimes, putting one of theirs on her stomach while they hold hers. My People do that sometimes, too, just for the fun of it. Zat One comes closer and then reaches over suddenly and takes the baby. He grabs it by the back flippers and swings it up and around and down against a hard part of the bowawa. The otter lady dives away and makes a sad sound that I make, too, and I know, even more than I knew before, that I must kill Zat One. A Person without time should go where there isn't any time and let the tides take him.

He goes on until he comes to a place too small for anybody to live there except maybe one or two, but nobody lives like that so there's nobody there. He makes fie out of dried sea weed and dead grasses. Then he cuts up the baby otter and puts its parts on stones in fie. After that he sits and dries himself in the setting sun. I don't go close because I don't want to see him eat the baby. I sleep resting on the waves out from the shore in the seaweed. It's a nice calm night for it. I eat a few clams. I open them with a

stone on my chest like the otters do. Then I lie on my back and doze. In the morning I see he's already making another ma stone to take the place of the one that got left back there. This one's bigger. I come in close to get a better look, because this ma doesn't have any feet or hands, which is funny. I laugh out loud and he turns and sees me there. "I know you'll not leave me," he says, "You said you loved me and you don't know how not to say what you mean. You don't even have a word for that."

I stop laughing and I don't answer.

He carves and chips all that day and eats the baby which makes me not hungry. The next morning I see he sits sad, maybe because he sees how I am, but maybe not. He used to sit sad all the time, though not so much lately. He sits sad, but he goes on carving that bigger ma stone. It's the size of two, maybe even three hands. Maybe even three hands as big as Deep Diver's. Having three hands makes me smile, but I don't laugh out loud. I don't want him to hear me. He's eaten more of the baby and he's stretched the little white fur on bones. I think how my People wouldn't do such a thing. They'd gathered around the otter baby and its mother and say what a wonderful baby it is. Tears come to me as I think this. I miss my brothers and sisters and all the mas and uncles. I miss laughing together and hugging. I miss my cousin's baby which I'm thinking of as though she was that baby otter. I'm wondering if Zat One would do such a thing to that baby. And I'm missing Old Man Lost Egg's talk about how the world is, and I think I'll have things to tell, too. Maybe pretty soon I'll be able to understand what the conch whisper. I can say already how round and round again the world is and I have lots to say that nobody else has had to say. They'll hardly recognize me. I even wonder at myself that I have this thing I have to do because the waves won't do it for me. Even when they had the chance they didn't do it. Why must it be that I must become like a wave and suck away Zat One all by myself?

The next day Zat One puts what's left of the baby in the bowawa and the big ma stone, and goes off again. I follow but well behind. He lands on the next big beach with People on it. I see him holding up the big ma stone. I can't hear him, but I can guess what he's saying. He's waving his arms around in that funny way he does and pointing at the sun. This time it looks as if he's making the sun the most important one of all, though we all know water is what we can't do without. I know he's looking them over, too. There are three red headed ones here. I know this is important to him so I come in. The People see me coming, but he doesn't. I pick up a stone almost as big as the ma stone he's holding and I wait behind him while he talks. This time he says that the ma of the sun is the most power-

ful because it's the sun that kills. That's the proof of it's power. "Water gives and the sun kills," he says, "and this is why the sun is above everything else." This is a new thing. I wait because I don't want to be mistaken about him. I want to make sure he's going to do what I think he's going to do. All those People have moved out of the water on to the beach and are looking at the ma stone. Even though I'm behind him, I know his little penis is peeping out because I can see that the People are looking at it and covering their mouths with their hands, and I also see that he has somebody picked out. She's sitting close to him and she's beautiful even though she's not into her full fat. She's one of the red haired ones.

I'm holding the rock ready to do something I've never done before, but now he's being different again. He's saying he'll leave the ma stone in exchange for the red woman. He says he's been looking for just this one for a long time. Then he asks her to come and be the greatest ma of the killing sun and I can see that she doesn't know how to answer or what to do. I think she wants to say, no, but not in front of her own People.

"You have the hair of fie." he says and then makes fie for them.

These People are a little different about that fie. They seem to like it no matter that it's much too hot to be of any use. Maybe that's because there are those three red haired ones here. Zat One is telling them that those red People are fie People and that they're like the sun, but they keep saying they're just like everybody else and that if he knew them better he would know that. Then he tells them he'll take the red haired Person out in the bowawa. He says just for the time it takes to snatch a fish, and she does get up, then, to see what that bowawa is like, and he leads her to where it is, but then I see that she sees what's left of the otter baby in it. Most of the baby is touched with fie and doesn't look like anything at all anymore, but Zat One has kept the white fur of it stretched out on those bones. You can see in it what it used to be. You can also see, when you're close to the bowawa, who the bowawa made of. You can see it's one of the biggest playful ones of all. She sees that, too, but he pushes her in. I'm behind them and I see he takes her from the back right then, as though that act is some way to push her in with and a way to push her down into the bowawa, and I know she isn't even sure that it happened to her. I'm thinking that I'm not surprised he never feels the fun of anything. I can tell by now that those who don't feel fun are dangerous to everybody. I'm wondering if his babies will be strange and terrible. I'm thinking I'll kill mine right away before I get to know it. I'll kill it even if it looks like a real Person so that the future won't come about. Only the present will go on and on. I remember I crossed my arms and said I wouldn't kill it, but I'm think-

ing it might be right to change what I said to a better saying.

But now I'm whistling shark again and Zat One is pushing the bowawa off with her in it. One big uncle is coming out to them. That uncle goes right to the bowawa and tries to tip it over and I start to help him. I'm thinking what a good idea that is, but that it'll take two of us, at least, to do it. But then, quick, Zat One takes that finger thing and flashes it, and the big uncle is rolling around in the water like a fish on land and then he's dead. By the time I turn around from that uncle, Zat One and the red haired one are beyond the surf.

I'm angry even at myself because I had the stone in my hand but I just watched and waited to see if he would be like he usually is, and then he was, and now here's this beautiful, red, young Person which he's trying to make the ma of some thin, hairy baby that won't be able to feel fun either. That young Person should be having her nice, fat, red haired child, and she should have a good chance to laugh and play around in the water with somebody she likes.

Then I see Zat One is doing another thing I haven't seen before. He's taking some of that string stuff he has and he's trying the red Person's wrists together and then he ties her to the edge of the bowawa. I'm surprised, and I think to myself that this isn't some other strange and much later time, this is now, and just as strange as if it were some place else entirely.

They go along, and I follow, wondering where is the fun in all this and why do it? Then I remember how land-touched and sun-touched he is. Zat One may be half lizard. I've seen a lizard look in his eyes. I feel very, very, very, very sorry for that red headed Person who maybe only just picked out her cowery.

She sees me coming and I see her seeing me. I stay back, but I wave the wavy-wave that means I'll follow wherever she goes. She can't wave back, tied up like that, but she shakes her red hair at me and I know what she means.

I smell sky water. Though I've only smelled it twice before I remember it. There's not only the smell of water from the sky, but the smell of storm, too, and the waves are swelling up. I think maybe Zat One will be swept away if I'm not going to help him, but then I think I have to help the red one. I must find something to cut her free with. Zat One has a nice sharp thing.

I smell wet storm more and more and I know the red one smells it too because I see her raise her head and sniff. I'm also seeing, the red hair hanging down her back and I think, no wonder Zat One has taken her to

be his Zoe instead of me, but I worry that she's stuck to the bowawa and that the storm will come and she won't be able to save herself, so I move closer. "Go on in to shore." I say, for we're far out, but he says, no. Then the red one says, "Go in," too. He looks up into the wind and it seems he can tell what we can see and smell. Those clouds are still over at the elbow where they've been floating all these days, but I think now they'll come. "Go in while there's still time to do it," I say, and he does.

I want him swept away for the good of all of us. I don't think about you and the future that might be. I want him gone, but not this red one. I think of her like a little sister and I don't think that her hair's like fie, but that her hair is like the sweetest berries, or like when the land gets wet, which may begin to happen now. Mostly its yellow flowers, but there are a few red ones, too. I think I'll call her Red Flower Person. No one would wonder who was being called, so she'll know.

There's no good place to come ashore, but we do it anyway because by that time we have to. Zat One won't untie Red Flower Person even now, though I ask him to, and more than just once. I come, then, and help, so we do all get there, first to a flat rock and then to a split place and up that to a long, steep slope. It's not easy with Red Flower Person stuck to the bowawa and hands tied together, but Zat One makes her stay that way. He says, "Life isn't always just picking up clams as you creatures seem to think it is," but we know that.

The higher we go, the higher the waves come. I think they want somebody and I'll see to it the one they get will be Zat One. I'll give him to the storm so that nobody's baby will have to be swept away.

Then suddenly we see it's not spray anymore, and Red Flower Person and I look at each other because it's sky water and even though things aren't so good for us right now I see a good kind of look in her eyes and I see that she can see a good look in mine. In a day the land will flower. Everything will change then. Maybe even Zat One will feel the fun and be changed by it. How could it not be?

That night Zat One turns the bowawa upside down on himself and sleeps inside it with Red Flower Person still tied to it, inside with him. Later the bowawa blows off and almost takes Red Flower Person down the slope to the cliffs to be swept away, except I hear her whistle and go to help and we pull the bowawa to a better spot and put some rocks on top of it.

I don't sleep. I keep wondering what to do and I wonder even more after that because I should have pushed Zat One off right then but I didn't, partly because of his sharp thing that I think to use to cut Red Flower Person free and partly because I would have to push him down all the long

sloping place before we'd get to the cliffs and by that time he would have killed me with that other thing and then who would help Red Flower Person get free?

I have this place a little away from them, and I sit and sing storm songs to myself. Sometimes Red Flower Person sings along with me when the storm isn't so loud we can't hear each other. Her words are a little different from mine. I play a one, two, six, six, game. I lick the good sky water off myself. I catch some in my hands and drink. This sky water is the sweetest water of all. The sea of the sky is all made of this good stuff. I sleep a little finally, but I worry about what Zat One is doing to Red Flower Person in there under the bowawa.

It's the next night before the storm stops, and there's a good lot of sky water. After it stops, I really do sleep and when I wake up, everything is as bright as it usually is, and calm.

When Sweet Red Person comes out from under the bowawa, as best she can still tied up to it, I see that good look in her eyes again. We tell Zat One it's a thing full of fun and we must see it, but he says, no. We tell him we have to and that he should untie Sweet Red Person and that all three of us should go out into the land and drink sweet water and dance and watch the thing happening which has already begun, but he says no, again. Then I think I'll cut Sweet Red Person free right then. I'll get his sharp thing and do everything now. Why have I been waiting? I pick up a stone and come to him, but he takes out that thing that flashes and points it at me. I see the lizard look in his eyes, and yet I think I see that he doesn't want to do this, but I also see that he will if he needs to. I put the rock down. I turn my back to him and sit. So let him do it, then, except I worry that he will and it isn't me who needs to die, but if me, who will help Sweet Red Person?

"There's no time for the land," he says and puts that thing away. "Time! I've told you how important it is. We have to get this thing started."

But I wonder why we can't wait a few days until the color comes out. This is what People always do. You will do it. You'll go off to where the land blooms best for no other reason than to see it. You'll be like us in that.

I think that maybe I could leave Zap and Sweet Red Person and go into the land by myself, but I know I won't even though I want to, because Sweet Red needs me. I need to stay also, to help all the People get rid of Zap. I'm even thinking that we should not let you all come into being. I'll be the one to stop it in spite of what Old Man Lost Egg has said about an entirely different time and place than this one. But this isn't another time. This is right now. This isn't even back when Old Man Lost Egg spoke about it.

Then I remember that I had a dream of wrees during the storm. The

water came down from them all the time and they blew back and forth like seaweed and splashed the land with sky water. Under the wrees the flowers grew so that everything was yellow and the ground looked like the sun and we lived on the land as if we were sun People. It was shaded and wet and we lived there as if it were the bottom of the sea, but we missed swimming around. I was sad in my dream, and then I was frightened because land sharks came. a great school of land sharks and I had no place to go because I was up on the land already so there was no place to escape to.

The water is calm now. We take the bowawa down and we go on as we did go, me in the water and he, pushing the bowawa along with those funny things, and Sweet Red Person in it, still tied to it. Sometimes she splashes herself with water so as to feel cooler. Sometimes I do it for her. We laugh. Splashing always makes us laugh, maybe because we feel like children.

This time Zap has some of those stones in the bowawa and sometimes he stops to rest and when he does, he chips at a stone again. Other times he stops and makes marks in that thing he says is for his son. The ma stones are all still me, not Sweet Red Person. They're all a woman who has come into her full fat just like I am.

We stay far from shore. We pass beaches sometimes with People, but we don't stop, and then, almost by mistake, we do get to see the land flowers. We come to a place where the banks of the sea roll down smooth like I've never seen before, and there are tips of green there already. As we go along we begin to see more and more yellow and then a lot of it and some little patches of red. Then, after all, Zap brings the bowawa in closer to take a look and everything is like it is on the sun. Zap stands up in the bowawa and Sweet Red Person does, and I wish I could stand up and see better, too. We go closer, but he doesn't come in to be in it and feel it and dance. He just sits down again and we go on. When he lands, it's on a beach where he chases out some seals, though it's their beach.

This beach is full of stones and will be uncomfortable and it's a place where we can't see the yellow, though there are some small patches of it back where it's not so stony. It's almost as if Zap picked it because of not many flowers. It's as if he wants the opposite of fun. Could such a person be?

I'm getting more and more worried about Sweet Red Person being stuck like that to the bowawa. I tell Zap again that this isn't safe for her. I tell him she won't run away. "Let her come on back into the land with me," I say, "so as to be, for a little bit, as if standing on the sun." But Zap won't let that happen. He pulls the bowawa up where it's not quite so rocky, turns it upside down and they sleep there. I sleep just out beyond

the surf. It's a good night for it. Zap sits, the next day, making more one-hand-sized ma stones. He's getting good at it and faster. He makes as many as two hands worth.

All the while, I bring food to Sweet Red Person because it's impossible for her to go out and find something to eat. (Zap eats clams, but I don't get them for him.) I give Sweet Red Person the best of what I find. I call her Sister Sweet Red and she calls me Sister Sweet Ma though I tell her I'm not a ma yet. "But I'll watch over you, anyway." I say, "as if I was a ma of your own home people."

We talk, but not about what we really want to talk about. Zap sits too near. (I'm sorry now I taught him all those words.) After a while I go back a little ways into the land beyond the rocks and bring Sweet Red all the flowers I can carry. I tie them to themselves in little bunches and put them all around Sweet Red and we laugh and I see I'm making Sweet Red happy even though she's worried about being tied up. We hug, and laugh and play almost as if we were in the water, though you can't play very well on land. I see Zap watch us, but I can't tell what he's thinking. It's always some land kind of thought. Even if I knew what it was, I wouldn't even know it.

Then Sweet Red tells me sad things. She says that the big uncle that was killed was her mother's oldest brother, and she cries. She says he was called Old Bird because once he had helped one of those big, black birds. Old Bird fed it fish, and it would sit on Old Bird's head when he was standing about in the water or even when he was swimming. And then Sweet Red smiles because that's a good memory. "It stayed with Old Bird until it died, but it had a good death. Right after that the land bloomed."

We're in the shade of the bowawa or else we would have to be in the water because of the heat. Even Zap is down where the waves wash over him. He moves up with the tide, but Sister Sweet Red is stuck above where the water comes. Then I think to cup up water in a big shell and cool Sweet Red. After I make her good and wet and the pebbles and sand around her good and wet, we sit and watch the sun go down.

In the morning I see one of those stingers that maybe I slept close to all night and didn't know it. I'm always thinking what to do about Zap, so I think about that stinger. It's washing in slowly. Maybe Zap doesn't know about those things. Maybe I can use it.

ZUESA

This has been coming out better than I ever thought it could. I've found my real Zoe. I hadn't thought I'd be so lucky as to find a red haired one. There's a current flowing north and I felt it had grown a little cooler

though that be because of the rain. Maybe the flowers have a cooling effect. I thought, before I left that beach, I'd make each of them a hat out of seaweed and brush. Some of that seaweed is good and strong. They'll not have had hats before. Even the big one may like it. I worry about that one, though, and I wondered how jealous they get? It's a powerful emotion and I only had one shot left. I was saving it for her, just in case. She had been looking around for some way to get me even before, but they're all so childlike I can read everything they're about to do on their faces. They always hesitate. They never just do something. I saw her look and think about a jellied mass floating just beyond the surf and stopped that before she got started with it.

I'm glad I didn't let them go out to see the desert blooming. I hope it taught them something. That kind of thing goes with that all-day sex they do and I've no time for it. I want to see this world begin before I'm too old to keep control. I want to be in my prime when my sons are grown so I can help them learn. Rapid seeding is my first priority.

However I stayed on at that beach all the next day. The little goddesses were finished but I thought to make not only the hats, but a sun shade for the boat. I wondered that I'd not thought of it before. Poor Zoe. She was always splashing water on herself.

I was busy with the sun shade when she (what should I call her now?) she went out to get that jelly thing, holding out a shell and a piece of drifted up bush. I thought to teach her another lesson. I took out the zapper and told her to come on back and quickly. I said that even though I was about to make her a gift I knew she'd like, I'd not hesitate to kill her. I said she was no more than a seal or an otter to me, which wasn't true. I even told her I'd eat her, and that if I ate her, I'd know everything she knew. Of course I'd do no such thing. I said it even though I knew it would just add to her superstitions. I don't want to kill her. As much as I can say I like any of these creatures, these two I like, but it may come down to a matter of me or her.

The way she looks at me. . . . I've had that kind of look many times before. I've captured those small men from the mountain trees, and I've had four at once looking at me like that. And not so long ago, I've had my own captains looking, at me in the same how-to-get-rid-of-him manner. But these creatures will never be fast enough to do it.

VENUS

I like the thing he calls hauwa. That's a real thing. It has a nice wideness to it. It balances. It makes me feel like laughing. It's the very first land kind of thing that's a good thing. I'm surprised we haven't thought of it ourselves.

And then, when he makes the hauwa for the bowawa I'm surprised we didn't go around making things like that, too. After he gives me my hauwa, I put some of those flowers on it. I don't have to go far. There are clumps near our beach. I do that for Sweet Red's hauwa, too, even more than on mine. Then, when he finishes the hauwa for the bowawa, we go off again, me swimming not far behind. It's good they go slowly because I'm doing a lot of thinking, and I'm still worrying about Sweet Red being stuck to the bowawa all the time and what will happen to her if something happens?

But now he's landing at another beach full of People. I stay out in the water and wonder what to do. This beach has a lot of big clumps of rock out from the shore. Zap leaves the bowawa in the water and hooks it to one. I hide behind the rocks, but I come in closer when those People come out of the water to see what's happening with Zap on the beach. I don't hide on purpose exactly. I just wonder what to do and when and if. Things are going all wrong and I'm not fixing them. My mind isn't enough like a lizard. That's what I think. I never know what to do. I just wait.

Zap lines up all the new little ma stones in a half circle and then he begins to say everything all over again and then he's building fie like he always does, but these People have a lot more stuff on their beach to do it with, not only dry sea weed, but a lot of washed up land stuff, too. Zap takes all the stuff they have and makes a big circle of fie near the little ma stones he stuck into the sand. It's the biggest fie I ever saw and I think maybe this fie really is something even though it has no usefulness and is even hotter than I thought.

Sweet Red is still sitting stuck to the bowawa. She's in the shade of the hauwa that's on the bowawa, so she isn't wearing her own hauwa. Those hauwas are down in the bottom of the bowawa. By now all the People are gathered around Zap and are looking at the ma stones and at the fie. I swim over behind the bowawa and I take Sweet Red's hauwa out. I take that one because it has more flowers on it than my own. I go out away and put it on and then come ashore straight into them, standing up at the end and walking through the surf.

I am beautiful. Sweet Red is not yet as beautiful as I am though she will be even more so, but now I'm the most beautiful one that I know of. My hair hangs down and, it is whitened by the sun and I know it all shines. I walk in a way I've not seen anybody walk before. I don't know why I thought of it. I keep my arms up and out as wide as the hauwa, which is very wide. It comes out to beyond my shoulders. I walk slowly and I come to the edge of the half circle of fie and the half circle of ma stones. I'm the big one of all these little mas. I see I've surprised even Zap. He's backing

up. I see he's not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing, and, even though he saw the hauwa before and knew it was covered with yellow and some red, too, his eyes get as if he never saw such a thing as me in my hauwa coming up out of the sea, walking in this special way. And those People. they don't know what to do either. They back up a little, like Zap does. Fie didn't make them do it, and not the little ma stones, but I, with this hauwa did it. I know what they think, too, with all this yellow and this big round thing on my head. They think I'm the ma that peeks out from behind the sun.

I don't know what to do. I still haven't thought about any of it, but I already know that water can stop fie and I'm wet and so is the hauwa, This is a big fie, so I'm not sure, but I walk into it and don't think about if it hurts or not. I stand on one part of it and I drip there and make that part go away. This is right, I think. This is water over land things and even over the cruel sun.

"I am big water ma," I say. Then, again, I don't know what to do next, but I know I have to keep on doing something. I begin a song and dance which isn't like any song and dance I've ever seen or heard of before. I pick up some of the little ma stones and I dance on more fie and put that out, too. I sing "I Big water ma. Big water." It sounds so good I slap my thighs, but nobody dances with me. I'm too much for them. Then I say, "Here is Sweet Sweet Red." and Sweet Red stands up in the bowawa for them to see her and puts on my hauwa which is only a little less yellow than her hauwa that I'm wearing. Then I say how another beautiful one came blowing in with the sky water – that she was washed up to them by the good sea. And I say that the strange uncle is going to take her off the bowawa so she can dance with them. I really think that he will have to do that, but he says, no, so loud that everybody looks at him in a funny way.

Then I do know what to say and do. I say, "Those who say, no to water ma are all worth sand. Throw sand at him. Do him the sand dance." So they do, everybody laughing and crying together, except I know Zap can't do that. He has no tears.

By now the sand has put out all the fie and I see that all our things can put out that thing of Zap's, so I think I can get him, too. I whistle, "Shark, shark," thinking, the People will come and help me, but they think I mean real shark and they run up the beach away from us. Zap is running to the water and I know he wants to get away, in the bowawa with Sweet Red. I can get to him fast when he's in the water. I hold his head under as much as I can. He tries to get the zap thing. I know that if he does, he'll zap me and not even stop to think about it, so I don't stop to think either. I do every-

thing, fast, too. I pull out his sharp thing. I should have cut away the zap thing and thrown it away right then, but I'm only thinking to get Sweet Red free, which I do while Zap is sputtering in the water and half blind with sand. Then Sweet Red jumps out of the bowawa and we push Zap into it. I tie his hands together and then tie him to the bowawa just like he did to Sweet Red. She helps me. How she helps is she sits on him. Even though she's not into her full fat, she can keep him down that way. Then we push him away from there in the bowawa, and I tell Sweet Red, as we push him along, that she should go home, but she doesn't. I'm thinking we are becoming stranger and stranger, and that even I don't know I'll do next because here I am, going on to the second corner of the world instead of back home, too, even though Zap is tied up and can't make me do it.

A funny thing is going on with me. I want to see. I want to watch the shores change, and maybe even see those things Zap always talks about, those wrees. And I'm thinking the bowawa isn't such a bad thing upside down on the shore or to use to carry things along as you swim or to carry a person.

Sweet Red and I talk and talk. I keep telling her she should go back to her people, but she thinks she should stay with me and that we can help look after each other. She says it isn't good to be alone, that there's nobody to laugh with, and that's true. At first I don't tell her what I have in mind to do, which is to kill Zap before he zaps me or any more big uncles. But then I change my mind. I do tell her. And I tell her why, and the whole story about you – coming or not coming into being. I also tell her that, whether he's dead or alive, I'll be going on to see wree in a place I think is maybe full of flowers all the time.

We come into shore late. We just have time to turn the bowawa over on Zap. Then we go and make ourselves a nice sleeping place. We like each other so much we make just one pit. We sing a little night song.

In the morning we see that the flowers are beginning to wilt, and not just on our hauwas, but all over. We've missed the best part of the flowering land, and yet we still feel like singing.

ZUESA

"Gods," I'd shouted, "come leer at me and laugh. Gods trick the devils like the devils trick the Gods. Gods must, and must know all the tricks and how to use them since the devils are tricky ones." So spoke the Sarshina, though he, also, was an unbeliever. I tried to trick these creatures by telling a true story. They said there was a thing they call a shark out there so we stayed where we were. They gave me stones so I could carve. It wasn't easy

with my hands tied. We stayed where the waves could wash over us, the boat part way in the water and us in it's shade. They lay for a change not even playing. Well, perhaps playing for they twined their fingers together and, now and then, counted strange combinations of numbers. You'd think they were giving their military codes, though they never went over twelve. I thought, in this quiet mood of theirs perhaps I could convince them to let me go so I told the truth. And I decided I wouldn't scale down my thoughts for them anymore. I used words from my own language when I didn't find any in theirs. I hoped that, if they only half understood, that would impress them all the more.

"There is a place where everything is known," I said. "This is the place called Tree of the Valley of Lightning. All bow down to the thunder of it's name and to its men of fire, that's where I come from. I want to tell you the truth for the sake of time and forward motion, not for myself. There'll be a new kind of people, red and brown and silver. Each will have a particular place both in the trees and on the ground. The red people will have the highest places because they're the finest. I say that though I, myself, as you can see, am not one of them. And you'll be living changed lives, too, with boats and hats and robes and fire and beautiful containers that shine like the sun and some that can be seen through as though they were made of water and yet they can contain it. I can promise you such things will be of great advantage to your children and your children's children. I'm nothing but a worker for the sake of the future. You think this sex and seeding is fun for me. You should be able to see that it isn't. It's a duty more important to me than my own life or than any fun I might have. Surely you can see there is no fun in any of this for me."

For the first time since I was dropped here, I spoke as if to my own kind and with some of the gestures befitting my station, though I was tethered to my boat, even so I had a happy moment. Not as happy as if I swung on my own lanyards in the tops of towers or trees, but happy as a representative of my lineage, and, though but a lower prince among the princes, yet a prince, and speaking like a prince. And I saw that they heard and stopped their finger play in wonder at it.

VENUS

The land makes for strange ways of talking. Zap is saying a lot of funny things, and I don't know why he would think we wouldn't believe him, but he says, over and over again, that what he says is true. Why would it not be? Sweet Red and I laugh behind our hands at that.

I have a different idea of the future than the one Zap talks about. I have

the one Old Man Lost Egg hears when he listens to the biggest of the conch shells. I think I'll look around to find a good conch and see if it will talk to me. I need to hear more about our kind of future. I'm not one that would listen in on anything that belongs to Old Man Lost Egg except that I'm so far away and I'm not the same person I used to be and I need to know things.

I do find one. The inside is like Sweet Red's hair and the outside is full of spikes. I go far from them and sit and stare out to sea like I've seen Old Man Lost Egg do, and then, when I feel ready, I put the conch to my ear.

For a long time I hear nothing but the waves and the wind. This place in my ear is the spot where the past and future both come from, all swirled around in the conch, getting smaller and smaller and farther and farther away until there's nothing but a tiny dot of the memory of it left on either side of time. I wait and listen and then I seem to hear Old Man Lost Egg's voice, but he's whispering so I can't tell what he's trying to tell me. Then I hear that the voice is whispering that he isn't Old Man Lost Egg, but a different old man. His name is Last Verse for he sang, a long time ago, the last verse of the last song of all.

"I've been waiting for you," he tells me. "I've been whistling out of every conch. I've been on the wind to you. I tell you you must go on a long ways to the second corner of the world which is full of wrees. You must be wise about them and do the things to be done in wrees and eat the strange eggs of wree birds. You'll have to stand away from the wind because of the cold."

"But what about Zap?" I say, because this is the reason I was listening, into the shell.

"Never once will he be called uncle or be worthy of it. You, however, will be ma, and not only ma, but great ma, not of the cruel sun nor of any such land kind of thing, but ma of the weeds of the sea, so you'll be called Weed. You'll be the egg for out of you will come the new time, so you'll be called Egg. You'll hear things in the conchs, so you'll be called Conch. You'll feel things by the wind on your cheeks, so you'll be called Wind. You'll lean against the banks of the beaches, so you'll be called The Leaning Ma of the Banks of the Beaches. There is nothing you won't be called because everyone will be calling you."

His voice is fading, but he's going on and on though not about anything I need to know. "Zap," I say, "Zap. How or when shall he be killed and if?"

"Watch out!" he says.

I look up and see that Sweet Red is playing by the water but Zap is looking at me through the finger eye of the zipper even with his hands tied. I

get behind a rock though I don't know if that thing can go around and find me there or not, but he doesn't do it. Then I think how silly I was not to take that zap thing away in all this time that he's been tied up. I see that I'm not a good thinker about this kind of thing and I name myself Silly Old Do Nothing When It Should Be Done. I laugh at such a funny name and I know that Zap hears me laughing, here behind my stone and I wonder if he's naming me, The One Who Laughs When She Should Be Afraid, and I wonder if he thinks I'm even sillier than he was thinking I was when I left that zap thing with him. Then I laugh again to think of all the funny names he could be calling me. Sweet Red comes over to me and I tell her about it and we laugh together, but we keep watching Zap because now we know we have to all the time.

Sweet Red says we should, just the two of us, go off and leave him right now and here – that the shark wouldn't bother us. "You and I," she says, "he can have his zap thing for a friend." That makes us laugh again. I haven't had a time like this since I left my brothers and sisters back at my home beach. We needed to laugh. It makes us feel like, no matter what happens to us, we had a good time right now.

I tell Sweet Red how we have to get the zap thing, but that we should play we've forgotten about it like we really did. I tell her to keep on laughing, and go on out to him as though to sit in the shade of the bowawa with him, except she should sit on him like she did before and I would come and take the zap thing away. I tell her we'll have to be strong and fast as if to snatch a fish.

But that's not how it comes out. No wonder Last Verse didn't tell me what to do about Zap because it isn't something I wanted to know about or I'd not have had so much fun laughing with Sweet Red, which I'm glad I did.

Zap on land is different from Zap in the water even with his hands tied. He's like a lizard. He saw that Sweet Red was going to sit on him before she began to do it. We both tussled with him but he got his zap thing out and was trying, to get it turned towards me. Sweet Red kept getting in his way on purpose so he couldn't point it at me. Then it seemed he thought he could zap me, she was moving fast and it was Sweet Red, and not me, that got zapped – that rolled on the beach and tried to hold herself together but didn't. And Zap said, "Oh no," a lot of times, and, "Gods, come leer." Then Sweet Red is really dead I get angry like I've never been or knew I could be. I get on top of him while he's still saying; all that and holding Sweet Red. I take one of the biggest of the ma stones and I hit and hit. I hit until he stops. Then I take him out for the shark to have so it won't

want Sweet Red when I will take her for the tide. When we get in the water, he wakes up and struggles but then he says, "All right. Go ahead and drown me," and I say that I will do that, and he sees that I will. Then he says, "You said you'd not leave my son out for the storms to take." But I'm thinking he's already a dead man. Why should I answer? There's a lot of blood on his head, so the shark will come in the time it takes to snatch a fish and I want to get back to the beach.

Five new ma stones sit where The Killer Of Sweet Red sat in the shade of the bowawa. They're all me as they always are. I wish there was one like Sweet Red so I'd have a thing to remember her by, but things are just things, and I'll always remember her anyway.

I pick one stone ma up. I like it. Mostly there were bad things about The Killer Of Sweet Red, but there were one or two good things, like the funny things he told about. Flying around in and under land things is a thought I never had before. And wree, though I'd seen their bones. I have to wait before I can take Sweet Red out. So I take one of the mas that's not finished and I take one of his other stones and start to do as he did. It's not easy. My ma stone doesn't look like much except maybe a blow fish. But I get better fast and see that I could make a lot of these, too. I can make fie and sing a song about it. I can make a bowawa. I can walk like big water ma and sing that, too, and I, myself, can make a Sweet Red stone if I want to, and I do want to. I'll go see wree and the second corner of the world. Killer Of Sweet Red is right, I am going to have a baby. I'm not sure what I'll do about it, but I'll see who it turns out to be before I decide.

I pick up the conch shell then, wanting to hear Last Verse again, more for company than for advice, I already know what I'll do. But he does tell me some things I did want to know. He says my baby is going to be a girl. We both have a good laugh about that. She's going to have red hair just like Sweet Red even though she isn't Sweet Red's child. Last Verse says that I'll call her Sweet Red and not just ten or twelve times, but I'll call her that all the times I call her, which will be many, many times.

Gerald B. Stephenson has spent his formative years in the former industrial town of Troy, NY, where he works reshelving books in the library. This is his first sale.

It Don't Mean a Thing

Gerald B. Stephenson

Better Git It In Yo' Soul

AND these horns did blow all holy holy out, out into the air and down swinging into waiting ears, squeezed through to the brain and shook round in the brain-case, frantic nervous dervish dancing notes weaving around the TIME in old Jericho even those walls would not stand to that big brass.

His walls did not stand, his nerves did not stand but jumped and jangled with that joyful noise blow man BLOW that horn of plenty through the intervening air to ear BLUE whirlpool rushing winds sucking air into the great red FIRE his hair on fire his arms on fire his SOUL on fire his God on fire baking that old clay golem he was into brick breaking down and blowing AWAY like dust on the wind sucked into ducts and whistled through a thousand different wild steel fingers through the nervous system of the city and out into a million different rooms a million different people breathed him in through mouth and nose each little particle of him and then that HORN blasted through into each and every one of those waiting craniums, latent unknowing but now FULFILLED happy heads sending two million hands way up into the sky

Strange Meridian

Trane is dead but Elvis is alive, it wasn't fair. Izzy imagined maybe Trane didn't die either but was being held at a secret government facility somewhere in the Pacific Northwest where he played for Marilyn Monroe, who was singing for the downed alien pilots until she escaped to make her way to JFK's hideout in the Florida Keys. Now Trane plays on alone, with Marilyn gone no one pays much attention to the secret government camp anymore, and the aliens can't follow anything much after Chopin. He just

stands out in the yard playing fast riffs and slow, playing blues, playing the *Minute Waltz* or *Flight of the Bumblebees* when the aliens request it, just him and the aliens for miles and miles. If a horn blows in a forest, and there's no one around to hear. . . .

Izzy tells his friends and they all decide to go and rescue the great man from his confinement. "We'll need wheels," he says. "It's a long way to this place, and it's in a kind of remote location. In the mountains with not very good roads around it. Surrounded by government killers!"

His friends, Stoo and Dan and Puff, are excited by the prospect of the journey. Money is pooled, and the search begun for an appropriate vehicle. The gang of four walk down a cracked sidewalk in a square formation; two in front, two in back. They approach a lot with banners and cars with prices in neon lettering. A variety of uncared-for domestic models of recent vintage are scattered about, but the object of their desire sits alone in the corner: a yellow 1943 Packard sedan. Some rust, some dents, a tear in the upholstery, but they like it, it likes them, it follows them home.

My Favorite Things

Izzy examined the last bagel for spots of mold. He lived in a neighborhood where a good bagel was hard to find, fresh and hot right from the boiler, melting the cream cheese a little but not too much, Izzy didn't like it if the cream cheese got too runny. The hot, moist summer air meant a bagel didn't have long to live. And Izzy always insisted on having real bagels, not the chewy doughnuts from the supermarket up the street.

"They can't go bad; the polypropylene-impregnated outer skin particles cause moisture to be wicked away from the center and evaporated through the porous Gore-Tex-derivative protective layer yet still allow the bagel to retain proper chewiness and appealing mouthfeel," the clerk had explained. The clerk was plugged into the local metropolitan data center and so knew everything.

At home, Izzy argued with his TV set again while waiting for his bagel to finish toasting. It was on the old solipsist kick again. The TV set had only one sensory input, its cable, so it tended to confuse old *Star Trek* reruns with the war news. "Just because you have more sensory inputs than I do doesn't make 'em more reliable measures of truth," the set would declare.

"Doesn't it bother you to know that at the other end of your cable is a guy feeding the data stream into you, that everything you know of reality is dependent on the whim of this character to furnish an accurate picture of the world?" Izzy wondered how his own voice must sound to the TV,

since it was *not* part of the TV's data stream.

"So, this makes me different from you?" The TV said, for the thousandth time. The toaster, a more forgiving appliance, called Izzy away from his discussion.

The bagel tasted like a sandwich baggie filled with scorched earth.

And Suddenly It Jumped

The road brightly upsunny went on around in the golden views and whistling happy air. Pavement straight or winding through banks of big green trees waving hello hello hello in the wind to the old car bouncing by, and the passengers seated and jovial waved back, on their way and well with the world. "Hey hey hey," said Iz, "It is said the roads must roll, so let us roll the roads." The old last-legs Packard lurched to stop bridge-top over a wide rumbling river, old deep man rolling. Iz and Puff on one side, putting fingers into cracks in the concrete, friends Dan and Stoo on the other, pried up the street and rolled it. Oh, they pushed that log of bridge, bigger and bigger like a snowman's bottom till it rested on the other side, blocking traffic. Friend Packard hung out over the water, warm sunlight making jewels of the last spots of yellow paint showing through the rust. "Oh no," lamented Stoo, "how will we retrieve our wheels?" Its fenders waved slowly, goodbye, before taking the deep plunge noseways into the sparkly water.

Standing on the concrete log they had wrought the four riders waved goodbye and tossed their hats into the river in salute, a parade of cars lined up behind them honking in sympathy. "He'll return again when we need him most," Iz reassured the others.

A small-wheeled crunch crunching behind brought them around face to faceplate with a blue cylinder flashing a red light from up top. "Destruction of public property, disruption of infrastructure traffic flow," it spoke, spewing ticket number one from a slot in front.

"A copperbot!" Puff said in fear.

"We'll put it back," said Iz.

"Blatant disregard for physical reality," spoke the copperbot, spewing ticket number two.

Iz offered the round thing. "Would you care for a bagel?"

Kim

It was bus time for them all now, no wheels now. Going where no one else wanted to go, there was plenty of room on the bus for them and they could have any seats they wanted. They sat four across, two faded blue cloth seats, aisle, then two more faded blue cloth seats. Smelly old John in the back. Foggy, scratched window plexiglass gave a slightly blue cast to

the outside world. Two old ones up front with tops of blue curls poking up over seat backs. Izzy detected a pattern here that made him think of Picasso. "Hey," he said to the others, "we are traveling in a set-piece decorated in the manner of proto-cubism."

Stoo had a window seat to watch the plains go by. Every mile a new access road: Every four roads, a house. Every four houses, a silo. Road road road house, road road road house. "Our landscape is severely cubist in appearance. I would guess that the show curator behind the wheel has had exceptional violence done to his personal three-dimensionality, and is taking us on this tour of the wastelands to demonstrate the ravages of modern art upon the world, and upon himself."

"He hides behind his black partition, unable to face the derision of solid, free-standing folk," Puff continued. Puff sat in an aisle seat, and had raided the magazine pocket in front of his seat, and Stoo's as well. He sat opening and closing the brightly-colored magazines found inside. A sharp man in a tux rode in a red car with rounded woman. "They believe themselves masters of the world, but the true extent of reality evades their eyes." He closed the magazine. "They are cut off from the true light, but still they drive on in the darkness." He opened the magazine again. Confidence and desire shone from the man's face, hands gripping the wheel, in charge of his own destiny. "We see them, but the barrier is a gulf as wide as the universe." He closed the magazine, put it back in the pocket.

Chim Chim Cheree

It always amazed Izzy just how much the world could be changed by two ounces of the hot black stuff. As he drank from the tiny cup, the grey lifeless scene before him became colorful and vibrant. At least in his mind, it was all scrubbed clean, pristine as on the day of creation. This was in the gray urban place, a grayness even the rain wouldn't wash away. Cars drove around and around, with no place to park. Iz couldn't see too many pedestrians from his seat by the window, but a number of slavebots in different forms went about their business on the sidewalks. What did a slavebot care about the rain?

Inside the cafe, a few individuals sat plugged in to the newswires, the games, or the videos. At one or two tables couples were plugged into each other, hands touching silently over the round marble cafe tables. Izzy sipped his espresso, not plugged in to anything, just thinking. He stared at the demitasse in his hand, plain white ceramic, with a small chip in the rim.

Chairs scraped across the floor and bumped the edge of the table. Puff and Stoo sat down and put their new hats on the hat rack, Puff's a bowler, and Stoo's the more traditional beret. Puff had a long woolly scarf

wrapped loosely around his neck, the end of which came to rest in the saucer, a small drop of coffee getting instantly sucked into frayed end strands.

"I no longer remember the original inspiration," Izzy said to the others. "I no longer remember the burning whiteness. I no longer remember the sand under my feet, or the tablets in my hands."

"The wires attach us to each other, but they disconnect us from our selves," Stoo responded. A silent waitress brought a basket and stoneware coffee cups to the table. The cups clanked sharply in the quiet of the cafe. The waitress, dressed in a white smock that opened in the back, kept her eyes on the floorboards and slouched over slightly. Next to the table was a thin metal pole, attached to a wheeled base. The waitress hung a plastic bag full of coffee on a hook at the top of the pole. She retreated empty-handed to the rear of the cafe, sat down and plugged in again.

Puff took one of the small round loaves from the basket. "A miracle of organic chemistry, most ancient and divine chemistry. An infinitely complex choreography of molecules, order driven by the holy heat, not destroyed or burned away, but transformed into this perfect complement to our human needs." He bit it. Stoo filled his cup, opening the stop at the end of the tube hanging from the bag.

Izzy wiped away a layer of gray dust from the knife at his place on the table. His chair creaked as it moved back from the table. A man sat plugged in at the next table. His suit was expensive, and his coffee was untouched and cold. Izzy held a U-shaped length of wire in one hand. "Is he here? Is he somewhere else? In the depths of a machine, or perhaps the head of a woman? Can he go, and still stay behind?" Izzy cut the U at the bottom of the curve, and the man's eyes popped wide open. Breathing in, breathing out. A tiny drop of spittle formed at the lip, but several moments passed before the first blink. "Welcome to reality, man," Izzy said.

Jump, Monk

The darkened steel of the gun reflected light in little star patterns along the top edge of the barrel. The gun and the hand that held it stuck out of the shadows, barely illuminated by the moonlight breaking through the thin clouds. Izzy tried to keep his eyes averted, though he knew the gun was pointed directly at his head. The others appeared to be unaware of the threat. Izzy knew that if he made just one wrong move, he was done for, but he had no idea what that one wrong move might be. The gun did not waver or move to one side or the other, unless to follow Izzy's movements. Leaving did no good; wherever they went, there was a shadow, and out of the shadow, a gun. Izzy reached across the formica countertop and

dragged the sugarbowl back across the boomerang pattern. The coffee, bad coffee, was bitter.

Caravan

The outer skin of the forward cockpit began to glow like the filament of a light bulb from the friction of the air blowing by at high speed. The fire in Izzy's eyes glowed nearly as bright. He looked over at his navigator, Stoo, who worked the many buttons of the control panel like the keyboard of church organ. Dan held the forward gun, Puff watched the rear. A whole squadron of aliens was nearly upon them, had in fact damaged the rear fender of the old Packard, making it difficult to keep stable in the dense atmosphere. The craft was aerodynamically suited only for hard vacuum. Izzy had it floored, practically at the redline, but still the alien rocket attacks passed uncomfortably close. The aliens maneuvered in tight formation, in sleek vehicles of Italian manufacture. Puff blasted away with one hand as rapidly as he could feed ammo into the gun with the other, but the only effect was to force the aliens to keep back out of his range. Izzy kept low to the ground, hugging close to the side of the Wyoming bluffs. He could hear the whine of the tires reflected up from the pavement passing not more than a few feet under them. His eyes stung from the sweat dripping from his brow, but if he took his hands off the wheel for a moment to wipe it away, they'd be flattened into a sandstone and steel pancake. In a few moments they'd be entering the flatlands of Colorado, and if they didn't lose the aliens before coming into the open air they'd be dead meat, meat for the horrible bloodsucking squid things, intergalactic road pizza for the sweaty, hungry arthropods bent brainlessly on consuming our heroes. Blam! Another fender gone. Will our heroes survive? Or will they become just another highway snack for bug-eyed creatures passing through the solar neighborhood? Tune in next week!

Doctor Jazz

The mountains loomed up and over like terrible winged beasts in slow flight and cruel teeth all edged ready and wide open for the rending and the tearing. On the ridges of the mountains were nests of guns in place of nests of birds, electronic birds of prey watching the roads coming in. A hot wind blew sand up from the sides of the road, and the sand bounced off their arms and faces, and stuck in their eyes. The Packard waited silently on the road, the four travelers waited at the side of the road.

In the wind, the sound of the magic sax was a tiny undertone, a color or flavor to the air, rather than a truly perceptible sound. Each of them took a

step forward in the sand, following that sound like ants following a trail of pheromones. Thirst and hunger made them weak, and their muscles ached, and their heads began to buzz, but the sound went into their veins and made the blood cells jump and shout. Louder they each heard it, the sound carried directly into their heads, louder until they didn't even hear the sound of the rifles firing, the blood poured screaming into the sand. Puff was on his knees, and Stoo stood in place and began to cry. More shots, and Dan fell over backwards, arms folded up behind his head. Izzy took more steps, one, then another. The tune was brain-burstingly loud now, covering up all other noise except the sound of Stoo sobbing convulsively behind him. Bullets threw sand around his feet. He looked up and saw a thousand Suns ring the Earth, focussing their energy upon him, he took it all in, he took it all in. He lit up, and he burned.

WELCOME TO REALITY:
The Nightmares of Philip K. Dick
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