



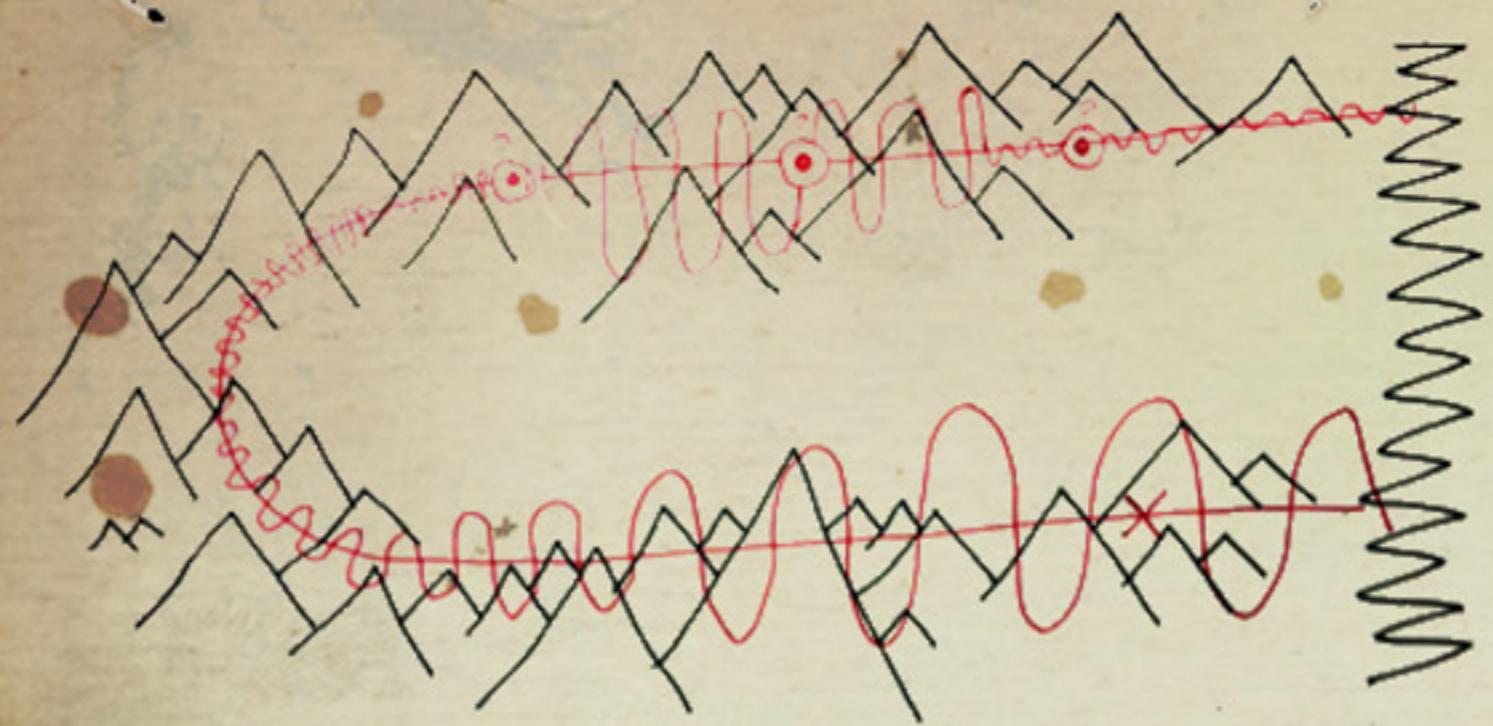
I was carving all sorts of cutlery (as Parlay said, they make the best sort of psychopomp) when I heard that screaming, which is now becoming dull on its twelfth pass of the valley. Doppler would have loved it here, but it is just making me angrier and angrier. At first I was concerned, shocked even, at its raggedness, the hopelessness of it, but now I can more or less follow its passage with my eye in the most unremarkable way. It is hopping down the rubble to what I thought was the North, but now I am not so sure.



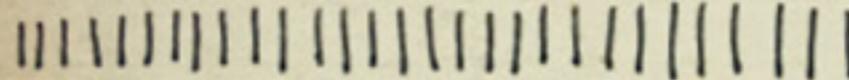
I have often thought that mountains are just piles of rubble for whose fall we were not present, and so we arrogantly say that they have always been there, or have come from below after some great disturbance. It is almost as if we are angry that we are not tectonic or global enough to affect them. I for one am not held beholden to them, they are only a midden dryer than most, a deposition of sherds. All rock has fallen from somewhere.

Now the scream is coming down to the treeline, and getting confused amongst the branches. Somewhere out there is where the walls begin or end. The wood that comprises it is more like bone, I can easily imagine the achingly slow progress, the bored panic of small fires, the countless generations waiting until their town is safe. But what I cannot understand is why they would build it like this. A wall serves an immediate need,

but this one, this must have taken hundreds of years, to look as dead as it does! It is almost as if they grew it to look just so ancient for the day that I arrived here. It extends further than I can walk without nearly collapsing from the effort, and there is no break in the fuse of branches and trunks and funerary leaves. Most of them are yew, a tree which pumps the light out of anywhere it is found. The darkness comes on so quickly under there, as you walk. Beneath their perpetual canopies, in amongst the husks and bare dirt, mushrooms grow upwards in bare shelves, unsupported. I wish that life was a little more free of chemistry, and that I could eat them, or use them to climb up and over. I think I am coming to that point where my stomach is poking holes in itself. A month is a long time not to eat, but I am observing my own rules. I am the kindest visitor they are likely to have, and I will not remove my mask any more, unless I absolutely have to.



The scream has cleared the treeline, and is building in speed and horror to whisk past me, and the gate, and my camp for the last



days. Parlay's thoughts about Troy are even more relevant now; I am sat here like an ornament, a gift that nobody will accept. I have not seen a head above the parapet, or heard anything apart from that scream carouselling over and over. Yes, I am tired, I am not afraid to admit it, I have travelled further than anyone still living to be here.

Here before the gate is a new meadow, the grass anaemic and startled, as until recently it was all old-growth forest. Thousands of pines have been felled and their bark shocked white by the experience, and I have been here so long that I have begun to name the peculiar avenues that they create. I have camped in what is now known as Boulevard.

The felling must have been recent, and sudden, the wood still has that vibration that those sensitive enough can still feel when great destruction has occurred. The regularity of it, stretching from the gate and up to where the rock becomes too steep for seeds, reminds me of a fossilised parade ground.^[1] Such places were never designed for individuals, here I feel like the tiny man-crumb that I am, the meat-kindling which came into this dangerous landscape of his own volition. What an awful place! I feel like I could be pestled at any moment.

There it goes! EEEEAHAAHHHAAHHHH-
HHNNNNNNNNNNN, battering the walls of my tent, or my cloak. I suppose it is my tent now that I have run out of walking. The cloak is a tool of travel, really, as I went through the world it provided me with a shield against the dust and rain, and a way to disguise my sag. At night, I ascended into it like a bat into its ceiling, but I am starting to see, if not flaws, then a kind of philosophical conflict there.

If I wish to sleep in it, I have to pull in my head, raise my arms and then squat down, my cranium resting against the ground. And there I have to stay, if I want to keep the weather off, and why should the weather matter to somebody like me? It is all I can do not to choke. There is no way for me to extricate myself and drive in guylines, and if I wish to rest my arms, the walls of the tent slacken and I lose all semblance of space. It falls into a wet bag. I have never felt at home in it, and it was a waste of money, I think.

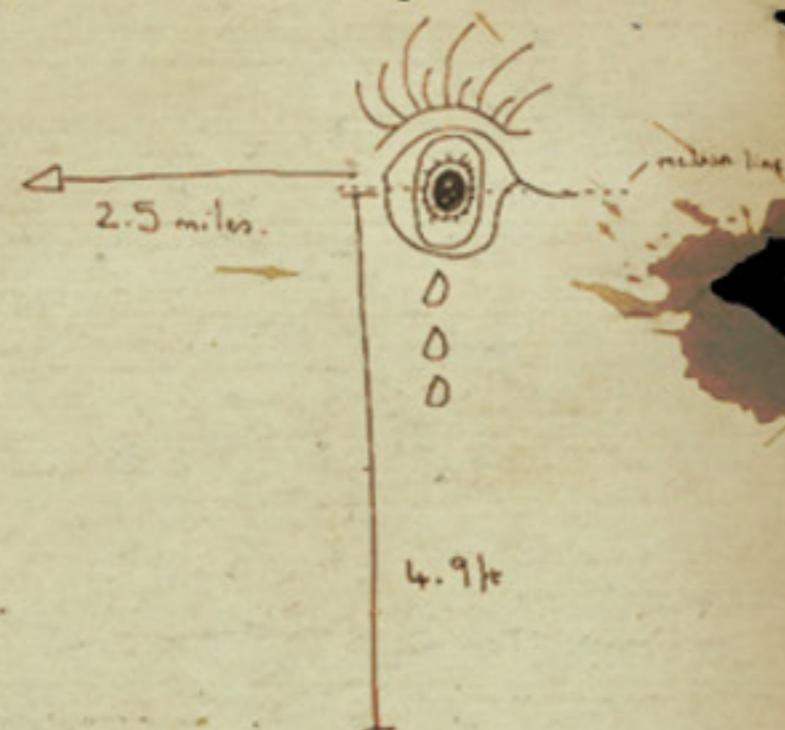
But, then again, any time my arms have started to tire, or I have felt my head swilling like a brandy glass, I think back to when it was newly-made, unmildewed and I was young. I was in Bjarmaland, and the Beormas had made me, if not a King, a sort of cautious trickster in their pantheon. They thought that I was some sort of giant wounded spirit-bird, come down from the ocean above. I had only been looking for Pyjamaland, a very different sort of questing.

That girl - what was her name? Guri? Gunnvor? Gudrun? - was a sacrifice, and I was supposed to eat her. When she came to me she was done up in brown silk, for the Beormas a mark of death, and her hair had been shaved off. I held up my tube to her ear, to explain myself, and then took her inside my cloak and my tent, and showed her the meaning of all the stars. She had told me that her people thought that the light were those of boats trying to catch them on their lures.

And here it comes again. The sixteenth time, and it has now hijacked the unique acoustics of the defiles through which I entered a month ago. They were inbred, those depths, the trees still singular and hideous, somehow. No chance on any interesting cross-pollination. I hated it there, and was so pleased when I came down the slope and into this place, more fool me.

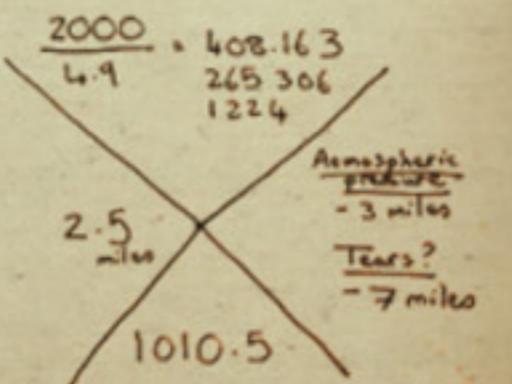
I cannot help wondering, as it fades away again, whether this ululation is meant for me. I cannot presume that, in this culture, such an agitation of the vocal chords is necessarily an expression of pain or suffering. Perhaps here it means something quite different, and they are merely letting me in on some excitement. I cannot presume to help someone who may, instead, be preparing a celebration for my arrival. It is possible to be too gallant. Maybe they have realised what I am, I am used to the ignorant changing their minds about me. I try to imagine what they would see if they were looking down at me. If we assume sea level, the distance up to a person's eyes is around five feet or so, or maybe four foot nine for a woman. Let's assume a woman, I like to be watched. At that height the female eye, unimpeded by tears, can see for around two and a half miles. But our screamer has the advantage of greater altitude, I think, given the volume of the scream, maybe two thousand

feet, and so she can most likely see between fifty and one thousand miles. In that case, they would have no trouble watching me, wandering up and down the avenues, statuesque even at that distance, going about my bizarre business and then, as night fell, crouching down, facing the mountains and pulling that great cloak around me, and lighting up like a flirtatious insect, my rump pulsing with tender reactions, trying to coax somebody out through that gate, or to let me through.



The Mollosscus is an interesting trick. It leaves me so sore, but it has worked in Agartha, and Camelot, also, and the second time I went to Iona and they made a light-house of me. I can adjust the itch to produce whatever colour is spiritually positive to my quarry, but here I have no research to fall back on. I have settled for ten short bursts, in a colour semaphore which I hope means:

I AM A FRIEND TO ALL OF YOU. LET ME IN. LET ME IN. LET ME IN.



'I wonder if it makes some special sign, when viewed from high above?'

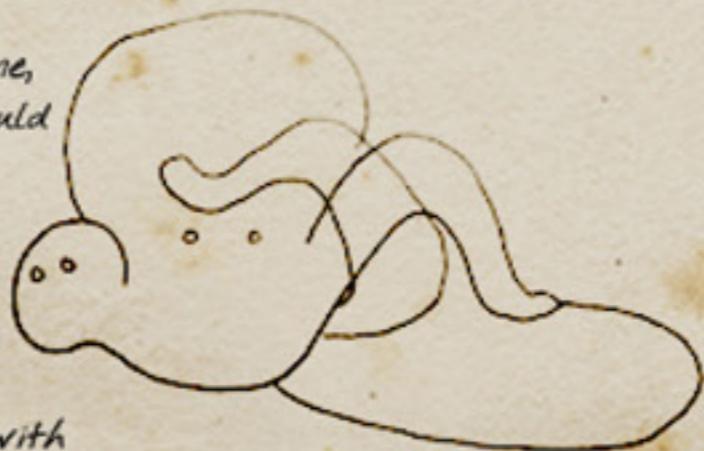
I wish that I could draw the configuration that we are lying in. Her fingers are drumming on the stretched rubber of my skull. Though there's a smaller part of me that wants to leave her alone, let her keep on drumming away, I know what could happen, and I will have to be firm with her.



I look out through the smooth hood her leg makes, bearded with a hair so fine that the wind barely moves it. She has moles that fade in the sun, and so as long as it does not go in I can continue to tell myself that they are not there. Through this perspective the legs of the townspeople are still being walked past us, but I cannot feel where their eyes are looking. I wonder where they are all going? Friend does not seem too concerned, so perhaps she knew that they would come this way. I am feeling a little wet underneath, and I think my throat is at its own lip, and threatening to overthrow, but as long as she does not buck and throw me to the ground I will manage to stay alive.

I feel as if I am somewhere else, my head is between a girl's thighs, and I associate such things with other places. Her arms are trembling. I know that my brain is heavy, but I wish that she would stop trying so hard to impress me with how relaxed she can be. Even if they won't look down, I know what the shuffling adults think as they walk past, and the children that are peppered throughout them, seasoning on a marriage. She does not have to pretend that it is ordinary for her, to lie here with something ████ Girls - don't be so fucking.

Through her legs I now see four more girls standing in the sun, ones to whom I have not been introduced, or rather four legs and two girls. There is a change in altitude where the cloth begins, that always comes at the nape of something, and the down there glitters like ore. They are leaning idly against a tree, scratching themselves and coughing without needing to, before a cloud picks on them and they are pale again, all gold gone from them.



And just then Friend's father sloped past, or rather prowling at such a slow pace as to be embarrassing. He turned his lower half slightly, and I wonder what face she made at him, what strand of father/daughterhood passed between them. I think I am close to defeating him. Nowadays he leaves us be for longer and longer periods, saying nothing when he does see us but instead only leaving with his brows knit, his baroque eyelids twitching, complex with stys. I do feel sorry for him, having to see such a change in his only daughter. She has this easiness that comes with growing up, this easiness with such a monster as myself. He is not equipped with the culture to handle it.

I watched his stained calves flex and almost stumble as a little girl brushed past. He shuddered, I could see it, I could see it, he actually shuddered at the thought of touching someone. He has hurried off to seek other old men.

With this strange demonstration of Mr. Light's intimacy issues, I might take this opportunity to discuss the topography of the people of Loss, and how it has revealed itself to me.



Now why has that come about? Why do I remember Abbieannia, after all this time? Is it the expert colours of the day, or the fact that I have a paintbrush in my hand? Is it these children streaming around me like heated air, that remind me of others, scissored babies, who smiled far more often? There are no orchards here, and fewer opportunities to take to the air. There's not even a play at war, and definitely no lightning, or grey-water.

Why is it coming to me now, when it usually keeps itself folded up and opaque? I would recognise that lightning anywhere, and I have that strange feeling that it did not come out of my hand on the prow of a paintbrush.

I suppose that it was there that I last lay down. I recall that they built me a little sling from the hems of their dresses, and I was buoyed up amongst them and away from Manley and Henry and all the other traitors. suppose that I never had cause to remember it, until I tried to lie down again, fully flat. It is like I have finally connected up all the disparate roads of my body and created a bypass, up and out and away from me. It could end very badly for me, if I do it incorrectly.

Friend and I are lying in a stand of *Andrews Lithic* that she chose, the stamens barely curled. We are not hidden, as the herbs are young and have not coiffed up seed-pods, but everybody around us ignores us anyway. I feel like I am lying in suspension, grass usually gives away the configurations of young lovers, but I think that when we rise this curious

little plant will spring back up and prove a loyal ally. Her chin is on my shoulder, and she is in that happy mood that is created by me writing, and her imagining that it is more important than it really is.

It had been her idea for me to get down on my back again, and I was loath to even try it. I patiently tried to tell her the story of the Vivian Girls, how they had made me lie down, had appealed to my windy temper and won through, and look look, I whispered, what had happened to them? Of course, she didn't know, but I told her both stories, to see which it was that she preferred. I wanted to explain, in terms that she would understand, what would happen in my throat, how like the bulkheads of a ship it was, and what bulkheads were, but then I would have to tell her about the sea, and I do not think that we are quite there yet. She certainly is not as afraid of the water as everybody else in Loss, but I cannot imagine what her reaction would be to the notion of such an expanse. She liked both the endings, but preferred the one where I went back and tried to make things better, and laughed when I told her about poor little Joice and the creeping thing in her Knickers, and how she was the only one of the sisters who would wear clothes. I finished the tale with Joice and I in the field of *Pop-Me-Lightly*. Friend laughs and laughs, a crescendo up into a personal stratosphere of ours and

Are you looking over my head?

Are you looking over my head?

Are you looking over
my head?

Are you looking over my head?

HRRRMMPPH RRRRN
I APOLOGISE FOR THIS FIGUREHEAD'S
INSIP INTERRUPTION
BUT I SEEK THE PORTS OF LIGH
FOR THE PUBLIC WEAL
NOT VAINGLORY

I AM
The Miasma Eremite
THE BRUCE OF BREATH
WHO ORBITED

AND THIS GREAT SC PBOOK

THE UNDERWEATHER VANITY
OR

A BATH FULL X CREATURES
OR
GREAT LYINGS DOWN

OR

TRAVELS IN less

Accompanied By my
own Pyrrings [sic]

ARE FOUL PAPERS, TO ACCOMPANY SUCH RESENT BAGGAGE!

MY FRONT MATTER IS LOAM ME

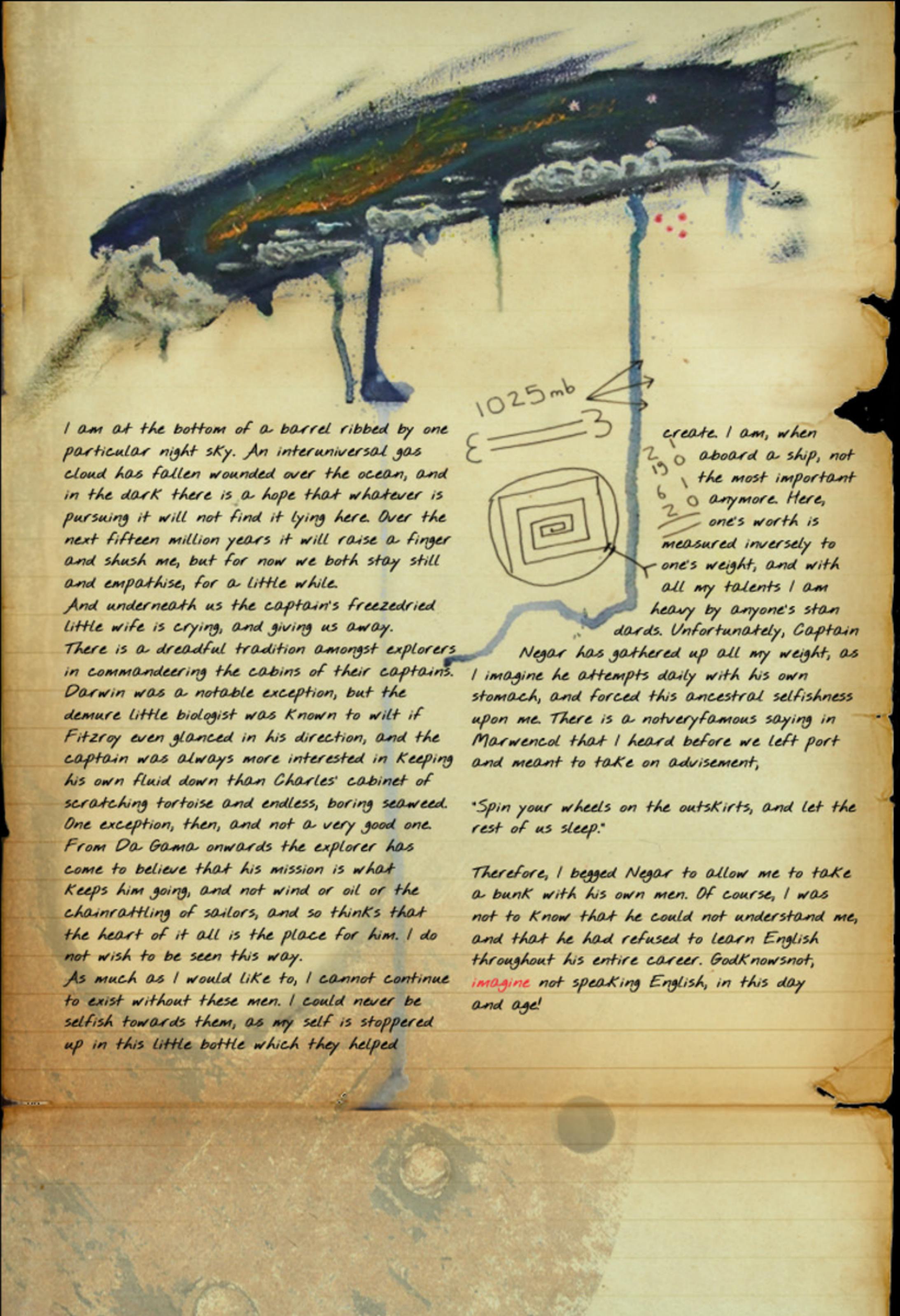
The right of exploitation
rests with the creator's
ancestors, which extends forth
to him, and after which point
that he is born he reverts them back to
his most distant forefathers, and
so on, slit through time unceasingly.

IF FOUND

Please return with awful haste, including
back matter, to:

LIVRO PILOTO
INÍCIO DE ANO
1953

Publicação Barbatana,
Rua dos Quintais,
Lagos



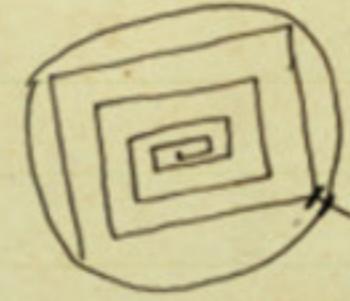
I am at the bottom of a barrel ribbed by one particular night sky. An interuniversal gas cloud has fallen wounded over the ocean, and in the dark there is a hope that whatever is pursuing it will not find it lying here. Over the next fifteen million years it will raise a finger and shush me, but for now we both stay still and empathise, for a little while.

And underneath us the captain's freezedried little wife is crying, and giving us away.

There is a dreadful tradition amongst explorers in commandeering the cabins of their captains. Darwin was a notable exception, but the demure little biologist was known to wilt if Fitzroy even glanced in his direction, and the captain was always more interested in keeping his own fluid down than Charles' cabinet of scratching tortoise and endless, boring seaweed. One exception, then, and not a very good one. From Da Gama onwards the explorer has come to believe that his mission is what keeps him going, and not wind or oil or the chainrattling of sailors, and so thinks that the heart of it all is the place for him. I do not wish to be seen this way.

As much as I would like to, I cannot continue to exist without these men. I could never be selfish towards them, as my self is stoppered up in this little bottle which they helped

1025 mb
E = 3



create. I am, when aboard a ship, not the most important anymore. Here, one's worth is measured inversely to one's weight, and with all my talents I am heavy by anyone's standards. Unfortunately, Captain Negar has gathered up all my weight, as I imagine he attempts daily with his own stomach, and forced this ancestral selfishness upon me. There is a notveryfamous saying in Marwencol that I heard before we left port and meant to take on advisement,

"Spin your wheels on the outskirts, and let the rest of us sleep."

Therefore, I begged Negar to allow me to take a bunk with his own men. Of course, I was not to know that he could not understand me, and that he had refused to learn English throughout his entire career. GodKnowsnott, imagine not speaking English, in this day and age!

|||||
I
|||||
WWWW

Everybody Knows the hierarchy on the ocean. English, then Spanish, and only after those two does one learn Portuguese. I tried to make him hear anything, I would sleep in the crow's nest, I would make a doublecastle from my luggage, I would climb into one of those big steel containers and hang it with scarfs and lamps, if he was so keen to see me comfortable.

Day	
1	
5	
10	
12	
15	
18	
22	
34	
40	

Lactic Underdose ||| 4x6

I am now fairly certain that "soberano" is a fairly dreadful curse in Portuguese, as the captain muttered it the entire way down through the superstructure. He carried my first luggage, the only one which would fit through any of the bulkhead doors, the effort made his neck turn purple like a venom was spreading through it. He slammed his door open and ticktocked the case onto the bed. His wife must have been experiencing a routine terror as all the men came back aboard, because she was ferreted in under the covers. The case caught her leg and she howled and leapt up. Those few times that I see her walking now she is limping.

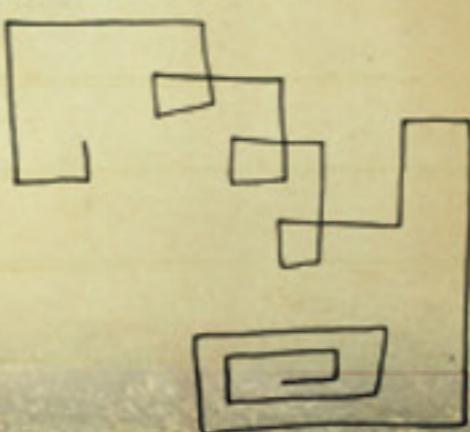
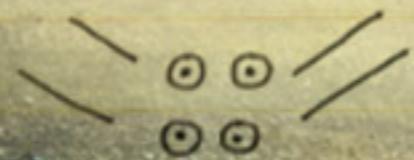
They began to shout at each other without any momentum. She was pointing at me, screaming, looking up past my eyes and back down past my chin, past the glass and the rubber, undressing my head as women tend to. When I tried to speak and she could not understand me, it only made things worse. Her eyes spread so far apart I thought that she might have been taking Darwin's lesser known advice and regressing down the equine route. That would have been a shame, because unlike so many other women she does not look in the least bit horselike.

She is compact, and compactness is manageable, and preferable, in a woman. If bulk is a sin aboard a vessel, the captain has saved himself some of the allowance and instead made his wife portable. I imagine that he has made her nonperishable as well, salted her down into toughness.

They continued in this manner for some time before she skittered across a rivet, hurting her back and whinnying, and was sucked out of the room in an instant. The captain glared at me, spat something, retrieved something else entirely from a shelf before he left, and then I was alone and trying to work out where I would rest my head for that long first night. Fortyone days on, and I still have not found a solution. The bulk of it can be propped against the camphor raft of their marital bed (which will prove fairly poor if we hit a reef), but every time we nick a swell the rounded bottom of the thing merrily nods to the tune and I slam into the deck.

Every single time, I look up at the dresser and see their cups and saucers, also, roundbottomed, giddily rocking in time.

I think that today's seaguale will be this gas cloud, and how she spoilt it. I just cannot express myself, and I know nobody else will have seen it. Every other man is asleep, apart from the timoneer, but he will be reading intermittently by the light of that glowing monstercompass and eating chocolate from ? under the dashboard. I worry about our heading, but at least there is nobody but me looking at this now, most likely nobody else on earth.

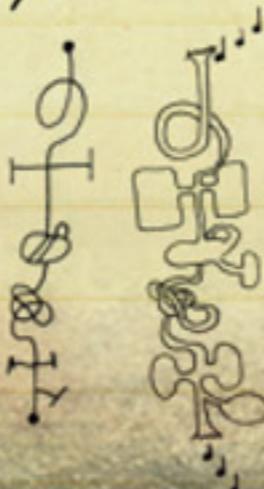
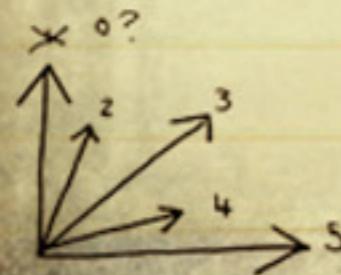


Now, right now, there she is again, screaming like her leg was severed in that cabin! I suppose that her gametes are against her. She is certainly not crippled, as I am certain that she is following me around the ship. Today she had made a little wigwam up against the exhaust vent, using of the blankets I brought from my room as a peace offering. Unfortunately, it was right in my path as I made my daily bilsdungroman to the bow, and as I approached she jetted out, like canned meat, and began screaming at me. Ten crewmen sloped over, brows already knit before they frowned and I gave them each fifteen rubbers before they were placated. I do not understand, she must be used to men, being aboard ship? She should lock herself away, if we all terrify her so much.

The captain's door is watched every night now, though if I emerge they scuttle off back to their berths. I'm not sure what they are expecting from me, but I intend to disappoint them.

Tonight I looped around the handrail to the stern, that forgotten place where heroes and lovers rarely find themselves, and watched a storm fight over our leavings, before the great wounded thing flounced down over us. She is still crying, on the deck just below me, haunting me with her husband's injury. I had brought her out a little bracelet that I found behind the headboard, that she must have dropped and forgotten and would be so pleased to have back, but I might now just throw it into the sea.

I do not know where the captain is. He does not sleep with her at her little Calvaries, he is too busy martyring himself to my comfort, and even failing in that. Three nights without sleep rids you of all sorts of beauty.



Standing here, with what I *imagine* is the wind whipping about me, I am thinking about Millifiori again. I have resolved that this will be the last time that I write about him. He would have made sure, as he always did, that he was here to witness this. He would have seen it for the sign that it really was, would have congratulated me on my election by the universe, and brought out exactly what we both wanted to drink from somewhere in the folds of his cloak, and found a way for us to drink it.

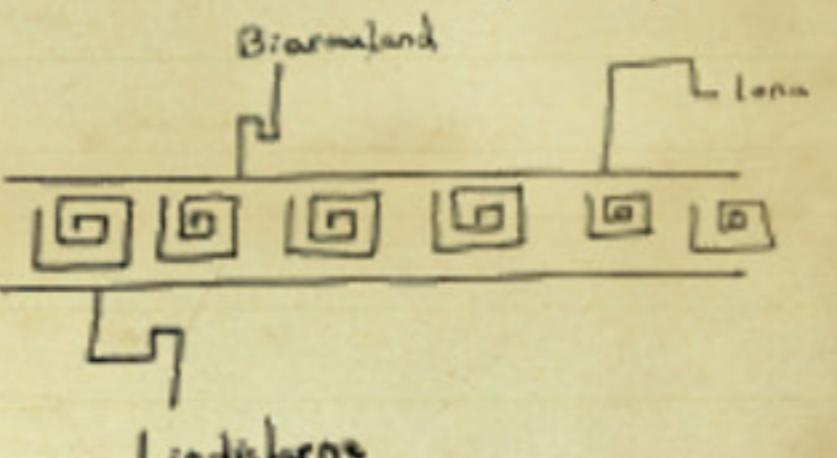
NHAAA HHT HHT HHT HHT

HRRRR //

And now I am finished with him.

The food is still atrocious. Tonight was fish skin rendered in bilge, and the blessing of rainwater to drink. I will find out where they are keeping all the good food; there must be provisions for ten or twelve months here somewhere, out on deck, amongst the canyons and defiles that we grew in a few short days at port. I do not know how the crew could not be more excited, with all this potential around them, all these hermetic cells full of whoknowswhat, covered in glyphs that none of us can understand. What a hoard we may be carrying! Before we stop anywhere else, I intend to find it.

For once, I am exceedingly hungry.





Scotland's Tumour: For The ~~im~~ diate
Attention of Mr. Phillip Tramm

I imagine that there was weather today

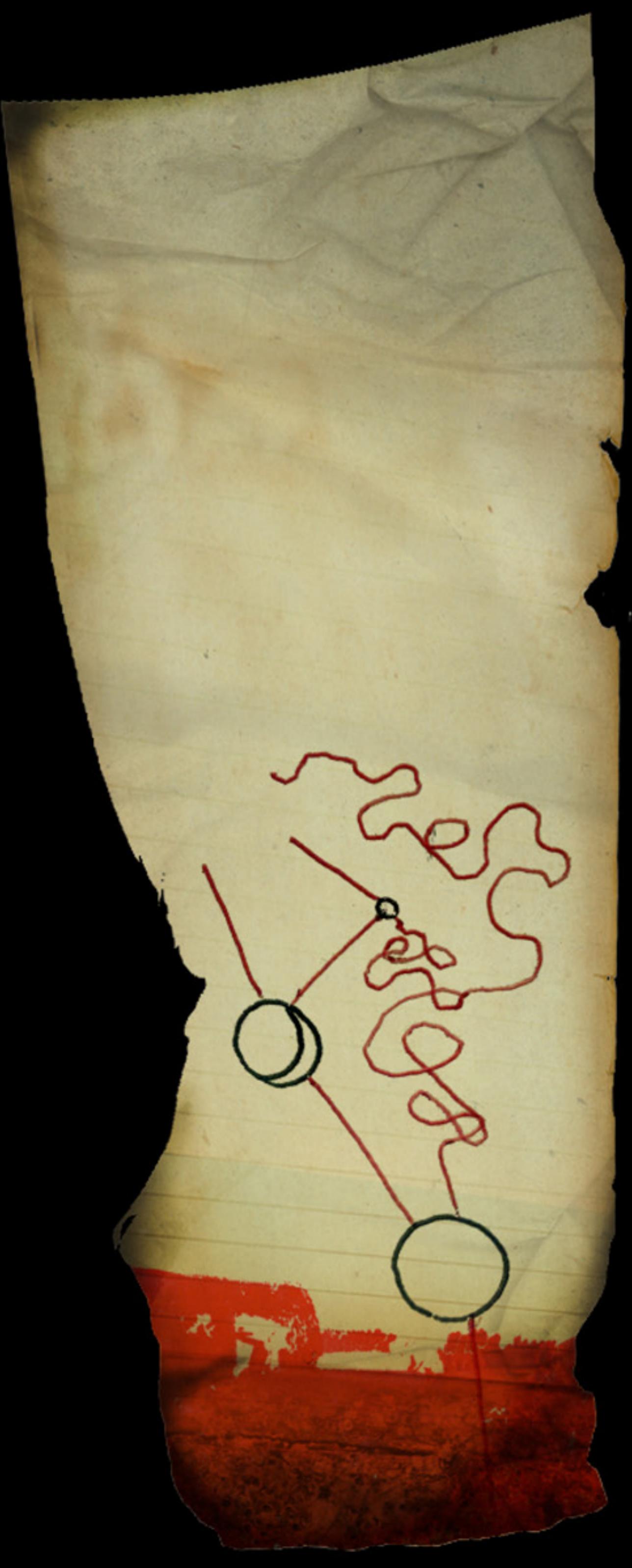
W,AELHW,AELHW,AELHW,AELHW,AELHW,AELHW,AEL

Finally, we are draining down the slopes of the ocean! I was beginning to get sick from seeing nothing but humans every day, all day. Even meals do not contain an entire creature to break the monotony. Today dinner was three arms each of a starfish, in a broth of its own womb. What they do with the trunks, I do not know.

When they broke the surface, the two HNAEL looked like elbows, setting themselves defiantly on the breakfast table. Twenty or so of the sailors rose from their duties, and the translator rushed towards the aft c'sle. I think that he was panicking over the omen. They bowed at our passage, and let us strut past them. I was not surprised to see this obeisance; the HNAEL is another creature that understands the agony of having a lifelong mission. Today is a new turn day. I am ready to start afresh with it, to eat differently, to sleep differently, to do everything differently. Of course, without the map I cannot be certain that it is a new turn day, but it has been so long since we turned the ship that the day must be approaching in any case. By terms of our agreement the captain has the map, and I am afraid that I cannot stop myself worrying that he will misread it, and we will sail straight for good. He grasped it so roughly when I came aboard, and with such a greedy man I am also afraid that he will

constantly be looking for his next napkin, and find it there on the chart table. But, of course, I cannot offer him my advice, speaking no Portuguese. I am ill with trying to express myself. I would rather never try again. From the colour of the ocean, that chilly fandango in the mornings and chipped green in the evenings, I think that this might be the Salmont, and if I can remember the map correctly we should turn southeast and towards land again. After that, when the gauges of the wheels are checked and fitted, it might be at least another week before we are on our way again, towards our next turn. The only way I would receive any instruction is if I found Jenny in amongst the stacks and brought her out on one of the cloudless nights she likes so much. Where is she, though? With her feet in the bilge, or was she loaded last? As far as I can remember she was in Dunnage #232, so I imagine that she is up high, just like the cherry after which she made me name her. And even if I did have the captain's Key, and could open every container on this ship, what would happen to her? Would they be scared of her, throw her into the ocean, and tie me to the divining mast like a topgallant?

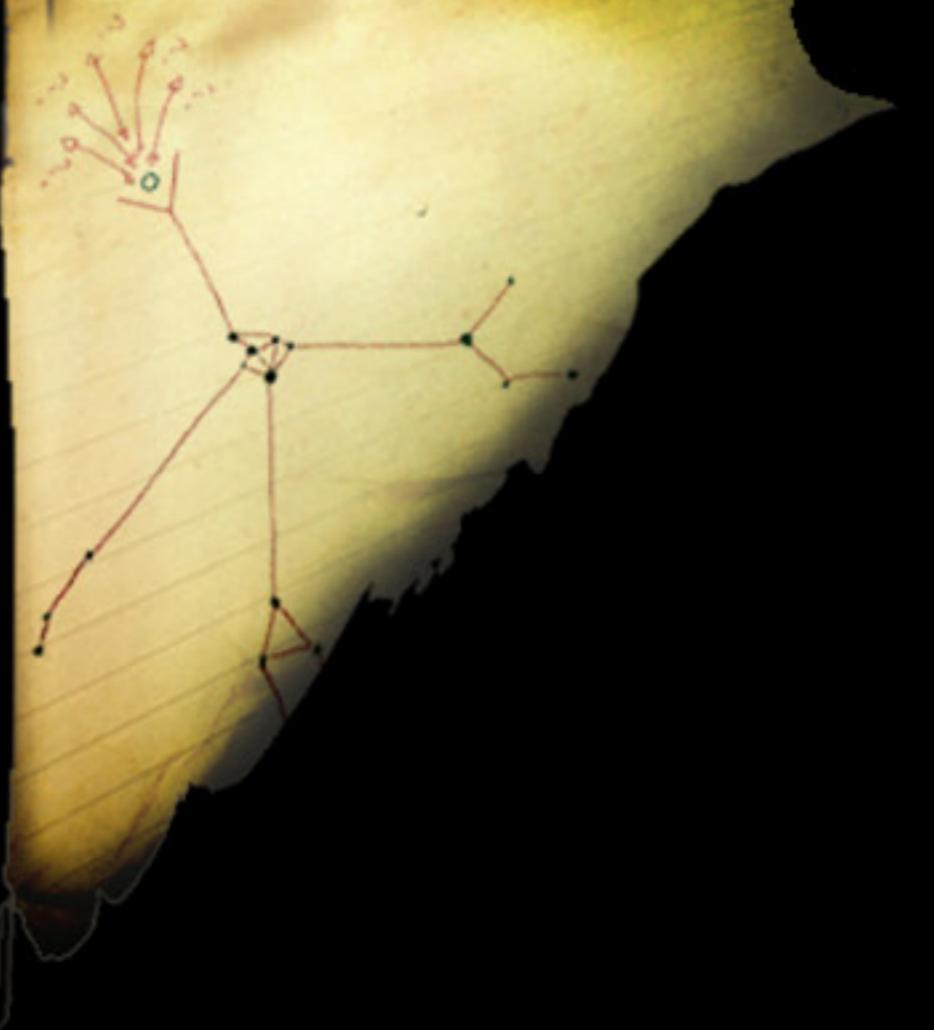




Official Vignette

is a genital crisis aboard. It's a rare thing aboard any ship, so aching with men; but I must keep quiet about it, if I am to study it. On one periphery there is a young engine lout, a boy of only 10, who apparently is unreliant on sleep. Despite having a fairly expressive loop he is cocky, silent, observant, captain of a family. There's a traditional rivalry between them, not so uniquely Portuguese at all, and the boy seems to see what I see when I look at the captain's scarred belly. He has taken to pulling at the feathers of a wigwam, whispering-fingered. I hear a crystalline little warning to match the beads being pulled back. He is persistent, and she is certainly very, very lonely.

much of nothing aboard a
not every journey can be
and that is only something
I may find nothing at all
Today's Sea Quale
do I lose for th



Phonetic Record Of Captain's Unneeded Outcry
(Recorded Manually By A Monoglot)

Vwosee! Kabasa. Kabelas! Vwosee vaimeajewdar!

My Reply:

Fodooendo mancar therebro! Eyoonaawoimporto com-
mooesto, eyoo tenho meyoos proprios problemas, sabei?
A question?

He seemed to wait for a response: have been written
as a note next to the previous statement.

My Reply:

Lyoonaopossintindirquecomessa mascaraporrem!
Eyoatennoselvahhremmayees.. teyeemosodokayaminya
mulher akee foral Eles naoteyem seercoo, Keyer,
vwosee vem akeppppsssshhssss, esse, ey elles vrow
soltar seyoos denches do lata!

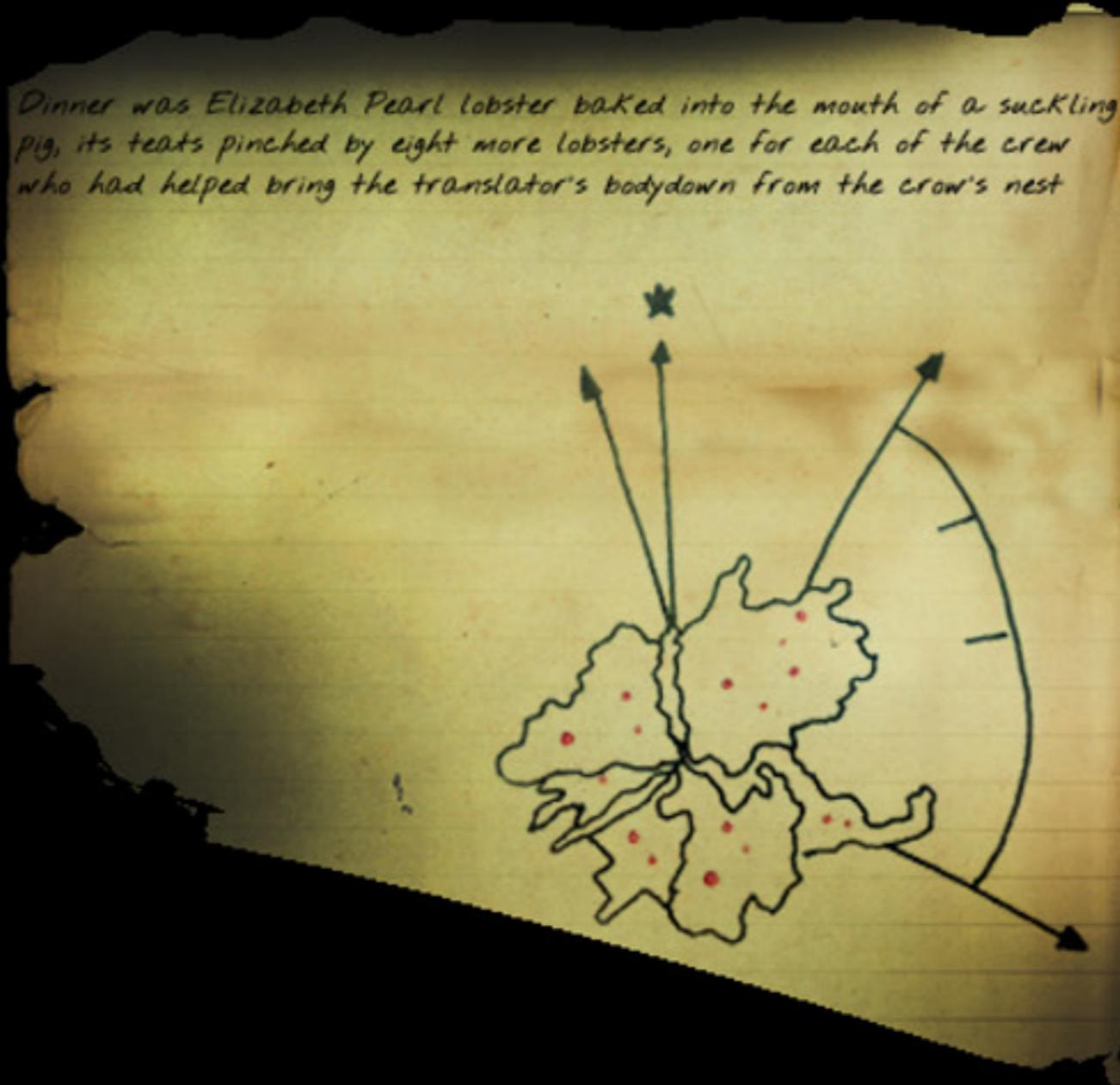
My Reply:

Addendum

I had to leave him after that. I made my way down
the stairs, and out onto the rasp-dry deck,
and finally in amongst the steely damp of the cargo
containers. I ran my knuckles along the
ribbing of each one, and imagined which smells would
be trying to bond with the rubber of my head right
now; the curried rust, the wockishness of the electric
fans, the halitose meltwater dripping from contain-
ers overhead, stacked in a way that the captain
believes is efficient.

I took my constitutional around one of the arbitrary
street corners created by this jumble, where I came
upon a container at deck level, unlocked and the
door ajar, something that I had searched for ever
since I boarded. I slipped inside without thinking,
though for a moment I thought that my forehead
would get trapped in the narrow slit. The darkness
was a tautology, and not worth mentioning (of course
it would be dark, here of all places) but as I
gingerly made my way to the back I had the most
curious synesthesia: I felt the rff rff of old wood
beneath my feet, the sound of dry flesh on dry flesh,
such as when you grip the arms of an old bench
that lives in a patch of sunshine. I knelt down and
scooped a handful of something up, and retreated
into the light to inspect it. I almost cannot believe
my luck. Chestnuts! A whole spoilt cell of them,
ready for me to process! I will need to rewrite all
my requests, all my bills and promises.
The container had none of my possessions, but with
the chestnuts, I no longer have to ask the captain
to make landfall. His ship is safe again.

Dinner was Elizabeth Pearl lobster baked into the mouth of a suckling pig, its teats pinched by eight more lobsters, one for each of the crew who had helped bring the translator's body down from the crow's nest



There has been a peculiar little ceremony tonight, with all the humility and stupidity of true sailors. It is good to see something so human after all this time alone with them. Two of the lookouts, giddy from altitude, came to my cabin and lifted me firmly from the bedside and out onto the deck. I was furious with them, because they had not knocked and my mask was only half-fitted. They had the honour of hearing the vibration of my throat unadulterated, as I called at them in broken Portuguese to stop, get away, beware, beware, beware. I will have to remind the captain what such a mistake would entail.

I had not brought my cloak topside due to their haste, and I felt the cold of the gun deck, bare like a tennis court, across which we strode and into the throngs of coloured bulbs hung about the towers of cargo. I thought for one colder moment that they had discovered the open chestnut container and meant to shut me up in it. But we took three lefts, two rights and went straight down a canyon to the very nugget of it all, where the oldest, most gigantic chests can be found. Everybody aboard was there. The captain had even allowed his wife out into open air for the occasion, though she did not look happy to be stood there next to him, like somebody had plucked a snail from its shell and it was embarrassed by its mucus. Somebody I did not recognise had found an old flugelhorn and was playing what sounded like Branco's Second Symphony dropped a few keys and rapped into sharpness. The captain stood on an orange crate in front of a vast container, twice as large as any I had seen. I think it may once have been eggshell blue, but the rust and fleck had started at its points and worked its way in everywhere.

It was ruinous, I could not tell how old it really was. In his hand was something that I had wanted

the entire voyage to see, a slender metal rod topped with what looked like a hooked nose. He gave a short speech, and then spun on his heel, digging the rod into the container's lock, which, as I had deduced correctly, was designed to nuzzle with that nose. The doors were hauled open, and just inside was a crumbling wall of what looked like brown sand, dust pouring off in little toffeel drifts. There were holes drilled all across it, but they were too regular to be the work of insects. The men around me surged forward, and began digging and prying at it, breaking off great chunks in their hands and stuffing it into their mouths.

It seems that the captain feels that it is time to bring out the Ship's Biscuit.

With all this tonight, and the banquet we feast on later, I believe that I have deciphered the captain's intent. He began our voyage with the dregs, as if we were starving. But now the seas are becoming rougher, and the turns come more frequently and we get closer and closer and quicker and quicker, he reveals his secret. I could almost believe that he keeps the food sequestered in his own stomach, taking scrapes of butter one by one, a wheel of cheese from under one tit after our third month, and the meat we always thought was part of him in larger and larger portions. I have a respect for him, after all this time, no man under his

command will ever starve, and when we pull into whatever port awaits us, we will be more than we were when we left port, one way or another.

I am so full I feel unwell. If I could move, I would throw every container into the water just to find the Christmas Pills, somewhere in the Dunnage #100s, if I remember

THE ROASTING DANCE, OR A STUDY
OF PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONFIGURATIONS
AMONGST THE PEOPLE OF LOSS

Let us roast some meat. We have in front of us a pit of hot coals, and a raw carcass already prepared. Some scholars have argued that meat is of such a density so as to increase its cooking time, and thus provide idle hours for the hunters and slayers to wait together, which in turn leads to speech, dance and festival. As the smell starts to rise into the air, and the familiar opal glow forms across the animal's flanks, chemistry continues its work. How do these organisms interact, and keep their hunger in check, with no discernible goal, task or activity? In what configurations do they stand?

In any other society, there are certain predictions that one could make. Husbands and wives will either stand sown together, or else enjoy the temporary lack of obligation and melt off into other configurations. Women might stand in one group, men in another, closer to the fire. Discussion might be raucous or hushed and anticipatory. Older members of the group would be sat either close to the fire to stay warm and assert their senior position, or else at the peripheries as a deference to those who have a use for the nutrients. Children would be a law unto themselves, and be the threads that bind the whole thing together. There might be a vertical hierarchy, with the children's world one of short falls and safe poisons. Alcohol would be set on high tables, or in high hands. The elderly, sat down and short of breath in the heat, straddle the two worlds, demikid once again. The Roasting Dance is the most telling social diagram in all of mankinds many varied rituals. I could write another fifty pages, and have done before

However, in Loss, I cannot invoke this Dance. At first I assumed that these people have a concept of festival and celebration, but I was quickly proved wrong. Here, the social hierarchy is fundamentally broken. It seems that it is only the young girls and the old men who have any sort of bond, and even then it is a perfunctory one, an opposition to each other that borders on disgust. I have seen mothers and fathers solidly ignore their children, leaving their retreating offspring to stand uncomfortably in a windbreak of silent friends. Almost as one (and in this Friend is a sweet exception) they utterly, utterly hate to be touched. They walk wide rings around each other, maintaining just enough distance, and stare out of the corner of their eyes, as if they are terrified to find another there. If they ever have to touch, they do so on the cloth of shirts or the greasy mortuaries of their hair. I am not unaware what a profound transgression Friend is committing, by lying here with me, on display to her entire community as they shuffle past. It would be interesting to discover how the rumours about me have spread in a society where nobody ever stands close enough to whisper.

Familial groups are, for the most part, universal. This is what my travels have led me, to understand. A birth reconfigures society in ways that are majuscule to a point that one can barely encompass them. Let us consider the father, taking Mr. Lights as our example. The conversion of a free wanderer, dependent on his own will, into a sentinel that has no

The screams stopped, and eventually so did we. There was a more usual, closer bray from the front of the column. We were in a wild bit of valley, far from the town itself, though instead of rising out of it all we had sagged into a depression. The grove still had the unfashionable accoutrement of mist from that morning. I stuck my head out and looked up the column. There was a hoocut of men and women at the head of it, spread out and engaged in what I thought excitedly at the time was a dance, but now I am not so sure. They would look around them in an exaggerated sweep, then crack their heads up, eyes wide, and shriek. I think they were just scared of the creatures that might be crawling up their legs, like housewives in want of a chair. Everybody around me, including Friend, was conducting the same search of the ground around them. As I strained my neck, I could see that the dancing group up ahead were surrounding a wide mound, built of earth and seemingly camouflaged with branches and leaves under the leopard dapple of the trees.



These weevils that we are hunting are known locally as the "Pageant" weevils, and as far as I can tell they are unique to the valley. They apparently have a powerful bite, and a prodigious rut, reproducing without cease. I am not an entomologist, but I had always thought of weevils as solitary creatures, not given to families or all their related idiocies (see above). All I had heard for months was how dangerous these things were, and that I must never stray into the needle-mattress. They prey on soft leather, digesting it in an acid sneeze and then crawling up inside the ball of your foot, eating it from within. What was it they called me when I first got here? I cannot remember now. They thought that the noise I cannot help making when I walk would flock the weevils to me in a heartbeat, though, and their fear was palpable.

I suppose that in coming along I have discovered the closest thing to a ceremony that these people possess. They bring the children with them to educate them about the weevil and its habits, and to conduct a strange sort of cull. Apparently, one cannot just kill a weevil, as there is a sort of pheromonal rage that dribbles out of the sour mash of its corpse, and sets its quadrillion offspring to war. The people of Loss instead conduct two separate exercises, which explained the long wrapped sacks that are lashed to every fifth person's back. When they find a weevil, they grip it tightly in a sort of longhandled vice, and paint its back with bright colours, in patterns and sharp lines that show up well on the forest floor. This makes it much harder for a walker to miss them. When this is complete, they take the vice and clip off the front right pedipalp. This turns the weevil's scuttling into a wide circle, meaning that even if they were to advance on the distant town, they would never reach it, becoming a philosophical exercise instead.

The frequency of this ritual coincides with every new generation of hatchlings, a calendar not transcribed anywhere, and instead stored in the collective medulla oblongata of the society.

I think that I was expecting a prehistoric predator the size of a dog, that could lay along the length of you like a woman and bring such a scream to your lips with the implied intimacy. But when I saw one, creeping over the needles towards me and Friend, I dispelled any hope for these people. It was barely a centimetre long, with one dribbling snout and bulbous eyes, with the carriage of an opera singer. It had a striated, fuzzy pelt that meant that it almost blended seamlessly into the needles. I think that it might have been sent out from the hive at just that moment, to show somebody with a bit of sense that all this fuss was for nothing.

It was crawling towards Friend with that insect hyperactivity, and at the moment I looked up from it she thrust her hand back towards me without looking around. She wriggled the fingers. She wanted me to hold it. Nobody else but me had seen the weevil, and I did not know what panic I would incite if I pointed it out.