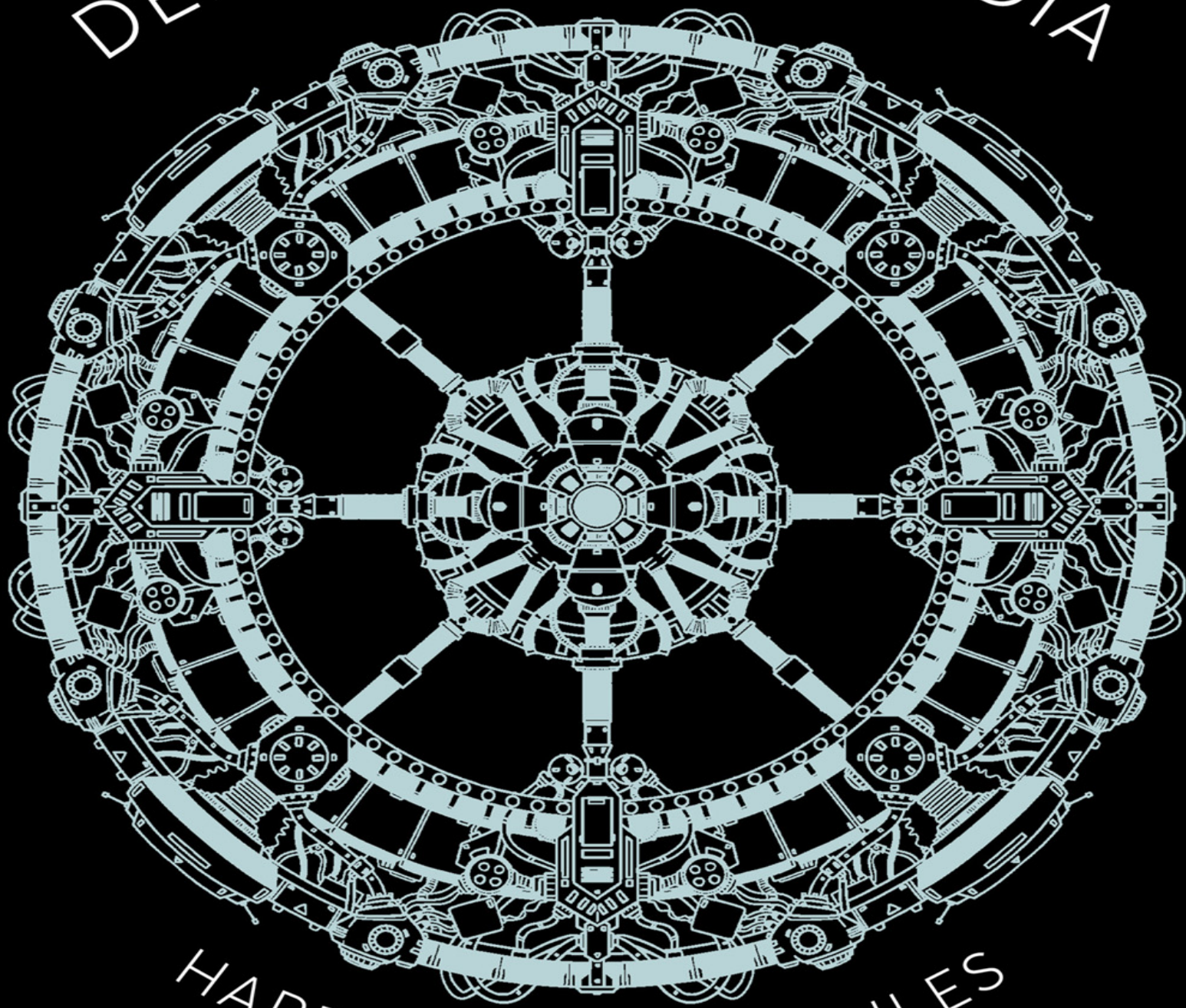


DEEP WHEEL ORCADIA

A NOVEL



HARRY JOSEPHINE GILES

Deep Wheel Orcadia

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PICADOR POETRY

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The Fock

ASTRID, a artist, comed haem tae Orcadia
INGA, her mither, captain o a lighteen yole
ØYVIND, Astrid's faither, a maet tekniecian
DARLING, a visietor fae Mars
NOOR, a xeno-arkaeologist
EYNAR, a steward o the Hoose
OLAF, a lighter wi Inga
HIGGIE, a sisadmin at the Light refinery
MARGIT, a lighter wi her awn yole
BRENNNA, a young radiecal
GUNNIE, a junior tekniecian, an bairn o Margit
Ither Orcadians: ASLAUG, AUGA, DAGMAR, ERIKA, ERLEND,
INGRID, KARI, SIGURD, TORSTEN, UNN, an plenty more, an thir
bairns.



The People

ASTRID, an artist, come home to Orcadia
INGA, her mother, captain of a lighting boat
ØYVIND, Astrid's father, a foodmeat technician
DARLING, a visitor from Mars
NOOR, a xeno-archaeologist
EYNAR, a landlord of the local bar
OLAF, a lighter with Inga
HIGGIE, a systems administrator at the Light refinery
MARGIT, a lighter with her own boat
BRENNNA, a young radical
GUNNIE, a junior technician, and Margit's child

Other Orcadians: ASLAUG, AUGA, DAGMAR, ERIKA, ERLEND, INGRID, KARI, SIGURD, TORSTEN, UNN, and many more, and their children.

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Wan

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Astrid docks

The chime o the tannoy is whit taks her back,
fer hid isno chaenged, nae more as the wirds
summonan her tae the airlock: her wirds,
at sheu isno heard fer eyght geud year.

Sheu waatched the Deep Wheel approch, gray-green,
hids Central Staetion tirlan yet
anent the yallo yotun, peedie
bolas teddert aroon hids ring,

pierheids trang wi yoles, wi glims,
an fund the gloup atween ootbye an in
clossan slaa – but only noo,
wi this soond, deus sheu ken whar sheu is.

Sheu leuks aroon the ither fock,
tryan tae mynd wha's uncan, an wha's
whas bairn, an wha's gien a naem fae sheu left,
an whas naem sheu shoud mynd yet.

An Astrid leuks tae anither body,
stannan at the vizzie-screen:
taall, pael, reid hair ravsie,
Martian style, gappan at the sight.

Sheu coud been a student fae college, but no
like Astrid, at waants tae waatch her an kinno
disno: sheu's ferfil bonnie an warld-like
fer Mars, but here i'the ramse poly

habitats o inner space,
sheu's a aafil queerie sowl.
The visietor leuks aroon an grins
at Astrid, at leuks away, no kennan

whit wey tae meet incoman joy.
The jaas o the transport appen, a gant
thrumman the bonns o the ship, a kord
whan the gangwey connecks. Astrid's taen

a peedie an weyghty life on her back,
an whan sheu steps intae the airlock
sheu catches the grief o whit will come
if the pairts o her canno find thir piece.



Astrid docks

The chime of the tannoy is what brings her back, because it hasn't changed, and neither have the words summoning her to the airlock: her words, which she hasn't heard for eight goodlong years.

She watched the Deep Wheel approach, grey-green, its Central Station still turntwistwhirlspinning againstaboutbefore the yellow gas giant, little bolas ropemoormarried around its ring

pierheads fullactiveintimate with boats, with gleampointlights, and found the chasmcleft between outside and inside closing laxslowly – but only now, with this sound, does she know where she is.

She looks around the other folk, trying to rememberknowreflectwill who is strangerweird, and who is whose child, and who's taken a name since she left, and whose name she should still rememberknowreflectwill.

And Astrid looks at another personbody, standing at the viewing screen: tall, pale, red hair roughabundantunkempt in a Martian style, gapingfoolishmindless at the sight.

She could have been a student from college, but not like Astrid, who wants to watch and also doesn't: she's veryfearfully finepretty and healthynormal for Mars, but here in the roughcurtbitter plasticpolymer

habitats of inner space, she's a veryawfully strangequeer souldperson. The visitor looks around and grinyears at Astrid, who looks away, not knowing

whathowwherewhy to meet incoming joy. The jaws of her transport open, a yawngasp thrumming the bones of the ship, a chord when the gangway connects. Astrid's brought

a little and heavymeaningful life on her back, and when she steps into the airlock, she begins to feel grief about what will happen if the parts of her can't find their placedistancepartwhile.

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Inga Lighter an Øyvind Grower waatch Astrid come in

Inga is thinkan, whit wey tae explaen
the staetion noo? That scant the lighteen,

that scrimp the tithes. Øyvind is fashan
at whither or no her vooels'll come haem.

Inga rubs her clippert heid
an thinks: Varday is tint the haalage,

Aikeray the traed, an only
the kirk is ivver fill, fer prayan.

Øyvind birls a pod in his lang
fingers an waatches the ship link

intae Meginwick's muckle dock,
a cathedral o girders an stances appenan

intae the haaf. Inga coonts
the yoles. Øyvind myndis on his years

on the Mars–Orcadia shippeen reute
an whit he kens o surface life,

whit he can share noo wi his dowter.
An whan the airlock appens an Astrid

is eyght year aalder an jeust the sam,
her spacer fock is waitan, still.

Øyvind shifts an appens his airms.
Inga says, “Buddo,” an lifts her bags.



Inga the Lighter and Øyvind the Grower watch Astrid come in

Inga is thinking about whathowherewhy to explain what the station is like now. So scarceshortsmall the lighting,

so meagrestunted the tithes. Øyvind is fussvexworrying about whether or not her vowels will come home.

Inga rubs her shorn head and thinks: Varday has losemissfailed the haulage,

Aikeray the trade, and only the church is ever full, for praying.

Øyvind whirlrushdancespins a pod in his long fingers and watches the ship glidetrotrestconnect

into Meginwick's greatbig dock, a cathedral of girders and platformsites opening

into deep space. Inga counts the boats. Øyvind rememberknowreflectwills his years

on the Mars–Orcadia shipping route and what he knows of planetary life,

what he can share now with his daughter. And when the airlock opens and Astrid

is eight years older and just the same, her spacer folk are waiting, stillfixedsecretsilent.

Øyvind changedodgemoves and opens his arms. Inga says, “FriendChildLove,” and lifts her bags.

The visietor, Darling, leuks fer a piece tae bide

“J-Just to look,” sheu says, catchan the poynt
o the yolewife’s quaistion. Sheu wis been raedan aboot
the Wrack-Hofn’s mistry, aboot the yoles
landan thir haal o Lights, aboot the stoor
i’ the gowden tide, aboot the paece o distance,

aboot a uncan wey o spaekan, o wirkan,
o pittan up wirds, o bidan, belongan, an waantid
tae leuk. But noo sheu’s speiran the first body
sheu saa i’ the bay fer the first directions, an habbers,
fer the first time no kennan hoo tae explaen hersel.

“Ir ye?” says the wife, no askan. A din-faced
stuggie body, her snackie haands is deep
i’ the wires o her craft. “Ye’ll waant tae spaek tae Eynar
o the Hoose. Whit ye’d caa wir *bar*. He’ll sort ye.
Tell him Margit sent ye.” Like Eynar, Margit

kens the guff o traed. Sheu poynts the wey.
Darling’s waatchan the fock on the pier fae the transport –
twa aalder fock tae meet yin ither lass,
at disno seem tae ken whar sheu’s comed an aa –
an Margit waatches wha hid is haads whas ee.

“Thir,” sheu says, an looder again, “That wey.”
Darling tries tae gaither Martian manners.
“Thank you so so much,” says Darling. “I’m Darling.”
Anither first: sheu blushes, seean Margit’s
edge o smirk an hearan Margit’s “Ir thoo.”



The visitor, Darling, looks for a placedistancepartwhile to waitstaylive

“Just to look,” she says, catching the point of the boat worker’s question. She has been reading about the Wreck-Havenharbour’s mystery, about the boats landing their haulcatch of Lights, about the stormstrifestrainspeeddust in the golden seatimetide, about the peace of distance,

about a strangerweird way of speaking, of working, of praying, of waitstayliving, belonging, and wanted to look. But now she’s asking the first personbody she saw in the hangar for the first directions, and stammers, for the first time not knowing how to explain herself.

“Is that so?” says the woman, not asking. A sallow shorttoughbutch personbody, her cleverquicksharp hands are deep in the wires of her craft. “You should speak to Eynar at the House. It’s what you’d call our bar. He’ll help. Tell him Margit sent you.” Like Eynar, Margit

knows the stinkpuffsnortnonsense of trade. She points the way. Darling’s watching the folk on the pier from the transport – two older folk to meet that other girlwoman, who doesn’t seem to know where she’s come either – and Margit watches who is holding whose eye.

“There,” she says, and louder again, “That way.” Darling tries to gather Martian manners. “Thank you so so much,” says Darling. “I’m Darling.” Another first: she blushes, seeing Margit’s edge of smile and hearing Margit’s “Is that so.”

Astrid an Darling settle in

Astrid aets wi her fock. “Thoo’ll wirk?”
speirs Inga ower the protein soup.
“A’m here tae draa,” says Astrid. “Tae wirk
at me art. A’m needan ideas fae haem.”

“Yass,” says Inga, “grand that. Thoo’ll tak
a job or twa fae the rotas forbye.”
Øyvind touches Astrid’s airm.
“Hid’s grand thoo’re haem. Thir plenty time.”

Halfweys roond the staetion, Darling,
breeksed wi sailan, pangit wi hopp,
sits i’the Hoose wi a plaet o maet.
Eynar teuk it tae her, sportan

a apron an a smile. Sheu tryd
tae speir him aboot his fock an the staetion:
he nodded an brustled back tae the bar.
Sheu waatches the fock an aets her maet.

Astrid spaeks aboot the journey,
aboot whit her pals in Mars is deuan.
The wirds is lood in thir peedie quaaters.
Inga an Øyvind’s speuns rudge.

Darling notts a plan on her slaet
o whit sheu waants tae see; she hopps
a smoosie body will ask whit sheu’s deuan.
Naebody deus. Sheu dights her plaet.

Eftir, the both o thaim lie i thir bunks
on conter airms o the Wheel, birlan,
askin thirsels if thir maed a mistaek,
askin thirsels whit wey is a haem.



Astrid and Darling settle in

Astrid eats with her folk. “Will you work?” asks Inga over the protein soup. “I’m here to draw,” says Astrid. “To work on my art. I want need ideas from home.”

“Yes,” says Inga, “that’s good big. And you’ll take a job or two from the rotas as well.” Øyvind touches Astrid’s arm. “It’s good big that you’re home. There’s plenty of time.”

Halfway around the station, Darling, knackered from sailing, fullbursting with hope, sits in the House with a plate of foodmeat. Eynar brought it to her, sporting

an apron and a smile. She tried to ask him about his people and the station: he nodded and bustlecrackled back to the bar. She watched the people and ate her foodmeat.

Astrid speaks about the journey, about what her friends on Mars are doing. The words are loud in their little rooms. Inga and Øyvind’s spoons gratehackrattle.

Darling notes down a plan on her slate of what she wants to see; she hopes a nosy personbody will ask what she’s doing. Nobody does. She cleanwipes her plate.

Later, both of them lie in their bedbunks on oppositeopposing arms of the Wheel, whirlrushdancespinning, asking themselves if they’ve made a mistake, asking themselves whathowwherewhy a home is.

Olaf Lighter an Eynar o the Hoose speir at the new teknolojy

“Whit wey deus hid wirk?” asks Eynar, pooran
a beer. “A’m no sure,” says Olaf,
“but yin arkaeologist, ken, ach,
whit’s her naem, telt hid like this—”

The jimpit yoleman taks twa glesses
an a pock o nuts an steers
this subtle injines trou the warp
o time, noo rings o spirit on

the binkled aluminium bar.
“The drive maks a pock, see,
o hyperspace tae win trou,
tae exceed relativistic constraints.”

“Ya, but,” says Eynar, “I thowt hid wis
more ontolojical restrictions
as teknolojical limits. Whit wey
ir thay avoydan catastrophic

temporal paradox, eh?” Olaf
taks a drowt o his ael an says,
“Ya weel. Best kens. An best kens
thay maan, fer hid’s bad enogh tae loss

the laast bit o the laast bit
o wir shippeen ithoot messan wi fuckan
multiversal anomalies
an aa.” An Eynar, no drinkan, says,

“A’ll drink tae yin,” lukkan ower
the empty poly chairs an taebles,
Olaf’s grayan hair, an weyghan
the wirth o his bisness, the size o his saeveens,

the price o a ticket tae Ross or Mars
or Proxima Centauri Twa,
an runnan the nummers again, an wipan
the trails o the hyperdrive fae the bar.



Olaf the Lighter and Eynar the Landlord question the new technology

“Whathowwherewhy does it work?” asks Eynar, pouring a beer. “I’m not sure,” says Olaf, “but that archaeologist, oh, you know, what’s her name, told me it was like this—”

The smallslenderneatdainty boat worker takes two empty glasses and a packetpocket of nuts and steers these subtle engines through the warp of time, now rings of spirit on

the bentdented aluminium bar. “The drive makes a packetpocket, see, of hyperspace to reachtravelachieve through, to exceed relativistic constraints.”

“Yes, but,” says Eynar, “I thought the problem was more ontological restrictions than technological limits. Whathowwherewhy can they avoid catastrophic

temporal paradox, eh?” Olaf takes a draught of his beer and says, “Yes well. Gods know. And gods know they must because it’s bad enough to lose

the last bit of the last bit of our shipping without messing with fucking multiversal anomalies as well.” And Eynar, not drinking, says,

“I’ll drink to that,” looking over the empty plasticpolymer chairs and tables, Olaf’s greying hair, and weighing of the worth of his business, the size of his savings,

the price of a ticket to Ross or Mars or Proxima Centauri B, and running the numbers again, and wiping the trails of the hyperdrive from the bar.

Higgie the Codd at her screens

Aence sheu wis a packer: whan the Lights cam in
sheu wirked the spectral refractors, prismatic acceleraetors,
containment dykes, brissan somtheen skare an lowse
intae somtheen birnable. No a coorse wark –
buttons an levers, mosstleens – sheu jeust needed care
an the canny gy o timeen. But sheu an her pals wis aye
tae loss the unavoydable race wi aatomaetion.
Higgie wis lucky: sheu wis keepid on at the skeul
tae ken the maths tae tak the coorse tae qualiefy
fer maintenance, so sheu wis the body lukkan eftir
machines lukkan eftir Lights, an than the body
lukkan eftir machines lukkan eftir machines.

Thir aalder noo, an only Higgie bade tae be
a elder. Dagmar's maed a faimly on Wolf; Kari
teuk a Martian job in maet; Torsten deed
an naen o them ivver spaek aboot hid; Higgie, back
croppenan more wi ivry year, dellt wi codd
an solder intae machines, missan the clashan, thinkan
in script an circuit. Sheu monietors: here at the plant,
by screen, an eftir, i'the back pew o the kirk. Sheu maks
peedie adjustments: wha sits whar, whit wirts is needed,
whan tae apply comfort an whan tae chide or spaek
a truth. Sheu isno alaen. She kens sheu disno sing
in tune, but at the plant an wi her screens sheu sings.



Higgie the Coder at her screens

Once she was a packer: when the Lights came in, she worked the
spectral refractors, prismatic accelerators, containment wallfieldbarriers,
squeezepressbruising something clearbrightcut and loosefree into

something burnable. It wasn't roughhardnasty work – buttons and levers, mostly – she just needed care and the skilledwisemagicalcautious sensecompetence of timing. But she and her friends were always going to lose the unavoidable race with automation. Higgie was luckyblessedhappy: she'd stayed at school to know the maths to take the course to qualify for maintenance, so she was the personbody looking after machines looking after Lights, and then the personbody looking after machines looking after machines.

They're older now, and only Higgie waitstaylived to be an elder. Dagmar made a family on Wolf; Kari took a Martian job in foodmeat; Torsten died, and none of them ever speak about it; Higgie, back bendcramptwisting more with every year, delved with code and solder into machines, missing the noisegossip, thinking in codeprogramscripture and circuit. She monitors: here at the plant, by screen, and after, in the back pew of the kirk. She makes little adjustments: who sits where, what words are needed, when to apply comfort and when to chide or speak a truth. She is not alone. She knows she does not sing in tune, but at the plant and with her screens she sings.

Astrid sketches Orcadia

Sheu trails a finger ower her slaet i'the curve
o her planet, than wi a canny swirl bleums
hids swaalls o yallo an corkalit. Wi shairp
stroks, the airms o Central Staetion skoot
atwart the screen, an peedie tigs an picks
mairk oot the eydent piers o Meginwick
i'the corner o her careful composietion.

An lukkan oot the peedie vizzie-bell,
doon the taing o Helay, airm o the kirk,
the dammer o the Deep Wheel surroondan her,
Astrid feels hersel faa, an lift, an faa.
Liv oot, sheu dights the natralism fae
her slaet, an stairts ower again, abstrack,
wi only the nirt o the thowt o coman haem

an odd gittan seean that peedie odds:
black lines fer the starns, blue dubs
fer the tides, green aircs fer the grand skail
o wheels an airms an bolas gaithered roond Central.
Mindan her lessons fae college, sheu follows sense
intae shape, an shape intae color, an noo sheu's closser
tae the grace ootbye, but closser maks more o a ranyie.

Again her dightan liv. Again a blenk.
Astrid steeks her een an haads the device
tae her chest, sam as her braethan wir liftan Orcadia
tae the surface. But the screen bides skarpy,
an the view bides stamagastan, an Astrid
settles back tae waatch an braethe an mynd,
her fingers restan jeust abeun the slaet.



Astrid sketches Orcadia

She trails a finger over her slate in the curve of her planet, then with a skilledwisemagicalcautious swirl blooms its swellwaves of yellow and scarlet dye. With sharp strokes, the arms of Central Station jutthrust across over the screen, and little taptwitchteases and tapchaptakes mark out the constantindustrious piers of Meginwick in the corner of her careful composition.

And looking out of the little viewsurveystudyaiming-bubblebell, down the promontory of Hella, arm of the church, the shockstunconfusion of the Deep Wheel surrounding her, Astrid feels herself fall, and lift, and fall. Palm flat, she cleanwipes the naturalism from her slate, and begins again, abstract, with only the crumbknot of the thought of coming home

and growing strangedifferent from seeing so little difference. Black lines for the stars, blue poolpuddlemuds for the seatimetides, green arcs for the goodbig scatterspreadspill of wheels and arms and bolas gathered round Central. Rememberknowreflectwilling her lessons from college, she follows sense into shape, and shape into colour, and now she's closer to the graceglory outside, but closer makes more of a writhingpain.

Again her cleanwiping palm. Again a blankblink. Astrid shutdarkens her eyes and holds the device to her chest, as if breathing was lifting Orcadia to the surface. But the screen waitstaylives barethinbarren, and the view waitstaylives bewildershockoverwhelming, so Astrid settles back to watch and breathe and rememberknowreflectwill, her fingers resting just above the slate.

The pieces Darling's been

Fer her coman o age she asked o her faithers
a week's residential on Aald Eart.
Nae Ball, nae press confrence, nae giftid
Executiveship, nae ship, even,
tho aa her brithers wis taen the sleekest
o sublight racers. Thay naeraboot
imploded, but sheu wis inherieted airts
an negotiated the week as traed
fer a simmer wirkan at senior manajment.
Mars simmers is ower lang.

That wis the stairt o her travaigan.
Foo wi the guff o fifty square mile
o aald equatorial rainforest, no
landscaepid ava, sheu kent
sheu wadno gang haem, but see as gret
a lot o the seiven starns as sheu coud.
Sheu peyed a ecogaird tae mairk her
on the wrang manifest, an fled. She saa
the Natralist munkahouses on Phobos,
whar papar refused ony maet traeted

wi more as fire, praeched wershy beauty.
Sheu saa a demonstraetion staetion
o separatist Angles: bred, snod,
rich, blond, an weel-armed.
Her faithers' credited wirts – first barman,
than teely, than dortan – trackid her
fae European federal mines tae stentless
pairties orbitan Wolf. Thay wir even
bowt bulletin time on the ansible network.
At lang an at lent sheu tint thir trackers

on the unregistered Autonomist traeder

whar, away, sheu teuk her new naem
an body an face, whar sheu teuk time
tae cheuss an recover, at teuk her here
tae Orcadia, the innermosst Nordren staetion,
aence the edge, aence the centre,
pangit an empty yet, wi Darling,
eftir peyan her rodd ower that
grand a piece o space, lukkan
fer a peedie piece tae listen an leuk.



The places distance part whiles Darling's been

For her coming of age she asked from her fathers a week's residential on Old Earth. No Ball, no press conference, no gifted Executiveship, no ship, even, though all of her brothers had taken the sleekest in sublightspeed racers. They almost imploded, but she had inherited skill directiongrift and negotiated the week in return for a summer working in senior management. Mars summers are very long.

This was the start of her roamingramblingtravels. Drunkmadfull on the stinkpuffsnortnonsense of fifty square miles of old equatorial rainforest, not landscaped at all, she knew she wouldn't go home, but see as much of the seven stars as she could. She paid an environmental quarantine agent to mark her down on the wrong manifest, and flew. She saw the Naturalist monasteries on Phobos, where holies refused any foodmeat treated

with more than fire, preached thinwatery beauty. She saw a demonstration station of separatist Angles: trainbreddrilled, cleantrimabsolute, rich, blond, and well-armed. Her fathers' moneyrespected words – first ragefrothseething, then pleadwheedling, then sulkforsaking – tracked her from federal mines on Europa to unrestrainedendless parties orbiting Wolf. They had even bought time for a bulletin on the ansible network. At long last and after much effort she lost their trackers

on the unregistered Autonomist trader where, awaydeaddistracted, she took her new name and body and face, where she took time to choose and

recover, which took her here to Orcadia, the Northern station closest to the galactic centre, once the edge, once the centre, fullbursting and empty still, with Darling, after buypaying her way across such a goodbig placedistancepartwhile of space, looking for a little placedistancepartwhile to listen and look.

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Inga an Olaf at the lighteen

Inga's at the helm, waatchan
fer lowes, fer shifts i'the drifts o rouk;
Olaf the sightsman's at the daikles,
airtan oot a trail o Lights
tae a dinger, a haal.

The linecrew is raedy. A fair while fae
a geud landeen. The wind o the yotun
is sma the day: cheust a hunner
metres a second. The yole chirps
fae the gowd whips.

Sailan as quiet an present here
as a meditaetion o Phobos papar,
thay wirk the wark the staetion wis biggid
tae wirk, hintan the fuel at fuels,
the oyl at oyls

a interstellar system o industry,
traed, galactic expansion: Light.
Inga an Olaf is aye a kord
wi voltage differs, atmospheric
jabble, mairjins.

Olaf spys a peak an mairks hid.
Inga senses a chaenge i'the paitren
o his concentraetion, an waits.
Thir notheen tae deu but wait.
His een spairk.

He checks his chairter anent his ladar
anent his osc, turns – an thay see hid
black horn brakkan gowd,
hulk looman ower the yole.

“Wrack! Brace!”

Inga rives the yole tae,
the linecrew an Olaf stellt tae thir bars,
the waa atween the crew an daeth
gaen flinterkin. The hurlan pulse
o thir reid alairm.

But—the yole—pulls clear!— skewan
anunder the whalman dairk o the wrack.
Ivry lighter gies a bustan
braeth, an settles sam as this
wir ordinar.

The wrack’s anither gret baest,
the second this crew is fund, o plenty
fund by the staetion, an more the laast
twatree year. A killer, a mistry,
an noo a godssend.

Fer a wrack like this will win a boonty.
Hid isno a haal o Lights, but
thir fock at pey fer this things noo.
Whan Inga relays thir stance, hid credits
anither survival.



Inga and Olaf at the lighting

Inga is at the helm, watching for flameglowflickerflares, for shifts in the drifts of fogfrost; Olaf, the screen monitor, is at the compasses, trying to find a trail of Light to a strike, a haulcatch.

The linecrew are ready. It’s been a long time since a good landing. The wind of the gas giant is low today: just a hundred metres per second. The boat creakraspcomplains from the golden gustdarttwistattacks.

Sailing as quiet and present here as a meditation of Phobos holies, they work the work that the station was built to do, gathergleansnatching the fuel that fuels, the oil that oils

an interstellar system of industry, trade, galactic expansion: Light. Inga and Olaf are always a chord with voltage differentials, atmospheric ripplesagitationconfusionchoppiness, margins.

Olaf spots a peak and marks it. Inga senses a change in the pattern of his concentration, and waits. There is nothing to do but wait. His eyes spark.

He checks his mapper againstaboutbefore his laser radar againstaboutbefore his oscilloscope, turns – and they see it: black prow breaking gold, hulk looming over the boat. “Wreck! Brace!”

Inga wrenchriplebreaks the boat away, the linecrew and Olaf fixbraced to their bars, the wall between the crew and death gone flimsygaudyfrivolous. The speedthrowrolldriving pulse of their red alarm.

But—the boat—pulls clear!— twistskewshunning under the overwhelming dark of the wreck. Every lighter gives a burstescaping breath, and settles as if this were ordinary.

The wreck’s another great animalmonster, the second this crew has found, of the many found by the station, and more the last few years. A killer, a mystery, and now a salvagewrecktreasure.

Because a wreck like this will reachtravelachieve a bounty. It isn’t a haulcatch of Lights, but there are people who pay for these things now. As Inga transmits their co-ordinates, it credits another survival.

Øyvind Astridsfaither, wirkan

The pinchers, maet
an spoot is only
visible trou

a microscopp,
but tae Øyvind
hid's like he's haalan

a ship: his muscles
is haaden in that
tight a tension.

Brenna an Gunnie,
young eens rotad
tae wirk wi him,

is cheetran i'the corner.
He glowers an lays
the braeth-thick

shaef o protein
intae hids piece,
than shifts tae the next.

“Smell yin,” he says.
Øyvind glories
i'the guff o the lab.

“Only haand-
growen reeks
this geud.”

Brenna comes
aside him, asks,
“Disno nano-

replicaetion
smell the sam?"
"Wheesht," he says.

He's takkan a coarse:
communiecaetions.
He kens his rowes

o protein dishes
maan rebrand
as luxury.

His airms birn.
His een tift.
He growes shairper.



Øyvind, Astrid's father, at work

The tongs, foodmeat and syringespout are only visible through
a microscope but to Øyvind it's like he's hauling
a ship: his muscles are held in such a tight tension.
Brenna and Gunnie, young ones assigned to work with him,
are chucklegiggling in the corner. He scowlstares and putlaystillweaves
the breath-thick
slice of protein into its placedistancepartwhile, then shifts to the next.
"Smell that," he says. Øyvind glories in the stinkpuffsnortnonsense of
the lab.
"Only the hand-cultivated stinksmokes this good."
Brenna comes beside him, asks, "Doesn't nano-
replication smell the same?" "Quiet," he says.
He's taking a course: communications. He knows his rows
of protein dishes must rebrand as luxury.

His arms burn. His eyes throb fester. He grows sharper.

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The arkaeolojist at the Wrack-Hofn

Noor steers her skiff trou the voyd hulks.
Hid's been a langersome day, the trachle o loggan
ivry mett o the wrack, Inga's godssend.

Fae sheu's comed tae space sheu's fund her body
thickenan – Orcadia's gravitaetional spin
a drag on her meun-grown bonns – an mynd thinnan.

Aence sheu wis yivver tae set her diastimeter
on the deck o a cell. Sheu'd sneck the laser
an dirl wi the new nummers: the thowt o paitrens

i'the teum plans o this gret black reums,
i'the shairp angles o thir slite black waas,
somepiece a staen tae mak thaim intae meanan.

Noo ivry twatree Stannart Month the lighters
tak anither wrack wi raedeens tae mirk
anither theory. The waas she passes is silent,

rich wi unanswerability: ships or staetions
or sculptures or temples or byres – sheu speeds the skiff –
or tombs or warks – speeds faaster yet – or follies

or calculaetors or classreum exercises
o Arkieteck-Gods. Nae drive, nae rudder, nae hairt,
nae braens, nae lungs, nae hass, nae tong, nae will,

undeeman abeun her, undeeman anunder, bund
in orbit ahint the Deep Wheel, the Hofn
aye growan in grandur an skrinklan in sense.



The archaeologist at the Wreck-Havenharbour

Noor steers her skiff through the empty abandoned hulks. It has been a long tiring day, the drudgemuddletrudge of logging every measure marklot of the wreck, Inga's salvagewrecktreasure.

Since she came to space she's found her body thickening – Orcadia's gravitational spin a drag on her moon-grown bones – and her mind thinning.

Once she was eagershakeanxious to set her distance-measurer on the floor of a chamber. She'd switch on the laser and thrillpierceshakewhirl to the new numbers: the thought of patterns

in the emptyhungry plans of these great black rooms, in the sharp angles of their smoothstilllevel black walls, somewhere a stone to make them into meaning.

Now every few Standard Months the lighters bring another wreck with readings to obscure dulldarken another theory. The walls she passes are silent,

rich with unanswerability: ships or stations or sculptures or temples or barns – she speeds the skiff – or tombs or factories – speeds faster still – or follies

or calculators or classroom exercises of Architect-Gods. No drive, no rudder, no heart, no brain, no lungs, no throatneckpass, no tongue, no will,

enormousintenseunbelievable above her, enormousintenseunbelievable below her, bound in orbit behind the Deep Wheel, the Havenharbour always growing in grandeur and shrinkdying in sense.

Astrid gangs tae kirk

“Thoo’ll come?” asks Øyvind, aesy enogh,
so Astrid sayed her “Yass” afore
myndan sheu wis faithless noo.
Sheu cam an fund sheu kent the wirds

tae ivry sang, an hoo tae speir
this god fer saefty an yin fer maet,
anither fer wittans an feck. Away,
sheu telt Orcadia’s past tae the grunders:

the curn o fock fae a curn o ships
at cam to big a curn o a staetion
an raffled thir myndeens o some histry
intae a kinno culture, parteeclar.

Here, sheu didno think o the differ
atween tael an true. Away,
sheu lairned tae be a aafil cynic.
Here, sheu coonts the ruives i’ the reuf

trou the lang an weel-kent sermon.
An Higgie’s soprano cracks the sam
notts ahint her, an wi this truth
Astrid finds forgieness: a caald

waarmth at’s notheen tae deu wi belief
an aatheen tae deu wi haird pews,
thin yarns, gray beuks,
an so is a myndeens tae her fae the gods.



Astrid goes to church

“Will you come?” asked Øyvind, casually enough, so Astrid said her “Yes” before remembering she was faithless now. She came and found she knew the words

to every song, and how to ask this god for safety and that for foodmeat and another for wisdomknowledge and powerworthattention.

Awaydistracted, she told Orcadia’s past to the planet-dwelling people:

the fewsmallgrain people from a fewsmallgrain ships that came to build a fewsmallgrain station, and tangled their giftremembrancememory of strange special history into a sort of culture, specific strange.

Here, she didn’t think of the difference between tale and true.

Awaydistracted, she learned to be an awful cynic. Here, she counts the rivets in the roof

through the long and familiar sermon. And Higgie’s soprano cracks the same notes behind her, and in this truth Astrid finds forgiveness: a cold

warmth that has nothing to do with belief and everything to do with hard pews, thin stories, grey books, and as such is a giftremembrancememory to her from the gods.

Darling gangs tae view the wracks

Sheu thowt thir'd be somtheen more,
but this teum shapes is jeust
the waant o starns. Thay glup

the orange lowe o the yotun
at colors aa Orcadia.
Thay glup her geyran face.

Noor sets the skiff tae drift
an leans back in her seat,
een closed. The wracks sloom by.

“What are they?” speirs Darling,
an the arkaeolojist bairks
a laagh. “Exactly,” says Noor.

“Exactly.” Darling is grabbid.
“But surely—I mean—they must—”
“Look,” says Noor, no appenan

her een. “There’s no known substance
which can form constructions
this vast or regular, and no

sign of a life that made them.
So.” An Darling turns
away. “I’m sorry,” sheu says.



Darling goes to see the wrecks

She thought there'd be something more, but these emptyhungry shapes
are just the wantneed of stars. They gulpcatchswallow

the orange flameglowflickerflare of the gas giant that colours all of Orcadia. They gulpcatchswallow her covetously staring face.

Noor sets the skiff to drift and leans back in her seat, eyes closed. The wrecks slideslinkdream by.

“What are they?” asks Darling, and the archaeologist barkcoughwarns a laugh. “Exactly,” says Noor.

“Exactly.” Darling is vexed. “But surely—I mean—they must—”
“Look,” says Noor, not opening

her eyes. “There is no known substance which can form constructions this vast or regular, and no

sign of a life that made them. So.” And Darling turns away. “I’m sorry,” she says.

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Olaf Lighter hishan his bairn tae sleep

The sang is aald an the week by
wis the bairn cheust takkan twatree steps:
a hairdly-human knitch o need,
but waakan. The bairn's een is clossan
an unner the sang is Olaf's quaistions:

Will thay tak tae the Wheel's ducts,
smoo roon labs o a night, clim
as possessed o a tail, dore tae be taen
oot i'the yoles, lairn the hidden
neuks o the staetion an naems o the Lights?

Like him, his mither an hers, langsyne,
pure mixter-maxter staetion fock,
makkan a piece taegither, sharan
the bit thir gotten, no kennan grund?
Or will this bairn be somtheen new?

Ten year an thay'll be gittan as taall
as thir room is wide, an lairnan grand
astrometry an polietics.
The polietics thir gotten here
is cheust enogh tae dael thir maet

an finiesh a teullyo ithoot a body
murdert. Thir ae planet tae meisur.
The only subjeck Olaf enjoyed
at the skeul wis histry. He kens the world
is noo expandan faaster again,

an that new speeds tak newer warlds,
channels tae sype Orcadia whill aa
that bides is histry, staetion gaen
tae bruckalaetion, voyd hulks.

So mibbe this bairn'll waant tae brak

the next speed barrier, or the next?

In this peedie bunk, draeman

o cities, draeman o meanan more.

Or draeman a love fer a dwynan piece?

Whit wan o this futurs is bruckit mosst?



Olaf the Lighter lulling his child to sleep

The song is old and last week the child just took a few steps: a hardly-human bundletruss of need, but walking. The child's eyes are closing, and under the song are Olaf's questions:

Will they enjoyexplore the Wheel's ducts, hidesneak into food laboratories at night, climb as though they had a tail, demandpesterbabble to be taken out in the boats, learn the hidden nooks of the station and names of Lights?

Like Olaf, his mother, and hers, a long way back, a very diverse mix of station people, making a placedistancepartwhile together, sharing the littlepiece they have and not knowing groundplanets. Or will this child be something new?

Ten years and they will be growing as tall as the room is wide, and learning goodbig astrometry and politics. The politics they have here is just enough to sharedividefate their foodmeat

and finish a fightbroilstruggle without anyone being murdered. There's one planet to measure. The only subject Olaf enjoyed at school was history. He knows that the world is now expanding faster again,

and that new speeds bring newer worlds, channels to draindry Orcadia until all that waitstaylives is history: station gone to ruindestruction, emptyabandoned hulks. So maybe this child will want to break

the next speed barrier, or the next? In this little bedbunk, dreaming of cities, dreaming of meaning more? Or dreaming a love for a

pinefadewithering placedistancepartwhile? And which of these futures is
the most brokenrubbishruined?

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Gunnie Margitsbairn nyargs at thir mither

“Ach mither!” thay say. “Thoo kens A’m waantan
tae sail wi thee! Whit wey will thoo
no tell the Ting tae pit me on
thee yole?” The week’s Ting is meant

tae gyde the staetion’s folk atween
wirk thir waantan an wirk at’s needed,
but Gunnie’s petitioned tae tak tae the Lights
fer a puckle o year an nivver been.

Thir mither stirs the protein soup
an says feenty-thing. “Mither!”
Gunnie’s voyce is clangan aff
the thin waas o the quaaters thay share.

An Margit turns. “I waant gets notheen,”
sheu says like spittan feeskid maet.
“An the Lights gets notheen an aa. Hid’s me
at’s keepid thoo fae the bleudy yoles.”

Gunnie’s skrek isno oot
thir thrapple whan Margit lifts the speun.
“Stoop! Dinno thoo come tae me
wi thee waant.” Margit ladles soup,

ignoran Gunnie’s hawie glower.
Sheu scraeps the pot an disno waste
a thowt. As Gunnie brattles oot,
thir mither taks thir bowl an aets.



Gunnie, Margit’s child, naggrumblefaulttaunts their mother

“Ach, mother!” they say. “You know I wantneed to sail with you! Whathowwherewhy won’t you tell the Council to assign me to your boat?” The weekly Council is meant

to manageguidecontrol the station’s people between work they want and work that’s needed, but Gunnie’s petitioned to work gathering Lights for several years and never been.

Their mother stirs the protein soup and says nothing. “Mother!” Gunnie’s voice is clanging off the thin walls of the quarters they share.

And Margit turns. “I wantneed gets nothing,” she says like spitting putridmouldy foodmeat. “And the Lights gets nothing either. It’s me that’s kept you off the bloody boats.”

Gunnie’s yellscreech hasn’t left their throat when Margit lifts the spoon. “Quiet! Don’t come to me with your wantneed.” Margit ladles soup,

ignoring Gunnie’s palewan scowlstare. She scrapes the pot and doesn’t waste a thoughtmorsel. As Gunnie crashrushstorms out, their mother takes their bowl and eats.

Øyvind Grower an Eynar o the Hoose tak an eveneen class

Thay wir bairns at the skeul taegither,
an noo hid's tretty year gaen,
an thir listenan tae this bairn

fae the bairn toons o Tau Ceti
wi a croose reid face
lairn a class o adults

reputaetional capietal,
brandeen niches, rare
haaf aathenticity . . .

Eynar taks notts noo,
as geud as Øyvind's fae skeul.
Thay canno leuk at each ither.

Eftir, whan that Brenna,
maed up like a Martian,
tries tae tise thaim tae

her teum raedeen grup –
“Revolutionary Thowt
in Pre-Stellar Eart,”

says sheu, keen as tae cut –
thir gled o the antic distraction
(tho thay jentle refuse the lass),

fer than this twa taal men
dinno hiv tae blether
aboot the peedie chairs,

or age, or wirk, or Light,
or whit lot o credits
this haep o dirt is warth.



Øyvind the Grower and Eynar the Landlord take an evening class

They went to school together as children, and now it's thirty years later and they're listening to this child

from the child towncities of Tau Ceti with a smugmerrypleased face
learnteach a class of adults

reputational capital, branding niches, rareunusual deep space
authenticity . . .

Eynar takes notes now, as good as Øyvind's were at school. They can't look at each other.

Afterwards, when that Brenna, adornedhappyinvented like a Martian, tries to coaxcajole them to

her emptyhungry reading group – “Revolutionary Thought in Pre-Stellar Earth,”

says she, keen enough to cut – they're glad of the amusinggrotesque distraction (though they gently refuse the girlwoman),

because then these two tall men don't have to talkchatramble about the little chairs

or age, or work, or Light, or how manymuch credits this heap of mudshitrubbish is worth.

A alt-arkaeologist visits wi Noor

“It’s simple,” he says, his wide blue een
bright, skrankie haands puskan.
“When you look at it right. They’re not
wrecks. Not broken. They are—they are
a message we don’t know how to decode.”
Noor freesks an sibbles her tea, tuinan
her lugs tae the Varday module’s meusic.
“Why else would they be here, in the path
of our expansion? Ready for us
to find? For us? Why else would the doors
have been left open?” The metal cruin:
solar plants, atmospheric
regulaetors, gravietational
spin. “And who, well, who else?
There’s no one else, no contact, no trace—”

Whanivver sheu gaed tae a surface noo
sheu coudno sleep until sheu’d fiegured
whit wis missan an tirlid the soond
o her pod tae *injine*. “—so it must be us!”
His face is pride an revelaction.
“It’s either us in the past or us
in the future. And really, you know, that’s the same,
I mean—” Noor taks his tagsie slaets,
leuks trou his hoppless calculaetions,
trou her feet, trou the deck,
trou the plies o Varday’s skin,
trou the quiet wracks haaden
in tow, tae the haaf an deeper yet.
Whit soonds sheu’d find oot thir, whit waves.



An alt-archaeologist pays a visit to Noor

“It’s simple,” he says, his wide blue eyes bright, his scraggymeagrespidery hands fidgetfussgustsearching. “When you look at it right. They’re not wrecks. Not broken. They are—they are a message we don’t know how to decode.” Noor smiles falsely and sipslurps her tea, tuning her ears to the Varday module’s music. “Why else would they be here, in the path of our expansion? Ready for us to find? For us? Why else would the doors have been left open?” The metal humtunesongwail: solar plants, atmospheric regulators, gravitational spin. “And who, well, who else? There’s no one else, no contact, no trace—”

Whenever she went to a surface now she couldn’t sleep until she’d worked out what was missing and turntwistspinwhirled the sound of her pod to *engine*. “—so it must be us!” His face is pride and revelation. “It’s either us in the past or us in the future. And really, you know, that’s the same, I mean—” She takes his shabbydisordered slates, looks through his hopeless calculations, through her feet, through the floor, through the strata of Varday’s skin, through the quiet wrecks held in tow, to deep space and deeper. What sounds she’d find out there, what waves.

Higgie the Codd clocks aff

Sheu snecks the monietors wan by wan,
fer the plant tae idle the sleepan oors.

Sheu lillilus tae her machines,
her aald face in ivry gless

– but no, yin’s no her face. Sheu blenks.
A karl sportan some kinno helmet

(but maed o some kinno metal? an glessless?)
is skirlan – but silent. He chairges the screen.

A flist o Light. Sheu shuts her een
but feels the sair lowe trou her lids.

But eftir a spell sheu peeks an than
thir notheen thir. Nae willan Light,

nae flegsme man. Sheu skites ootbye
an slams the doar, an waits ahint hid,

an sings a peedie bit looder, looder
as the hivvy clankan an crashan inbye

at isno the weel-kent tick o the plant
mairkan hids time, but soonds instaed—

no—ya—no—but—
like steel brakkan steel, a draem o a sword.



Higgie the Coder clocks off

She turns off the monitors one by one, for the plant to idle the sleeping hours.

She lullabies to her machines, her old face in each grey mirrorglass
— but no, that's not her face. She blinks. An older man wearing a kind of helmet

(but made of a kind of metal? and without glass?) is shrieksqualling — but silent. He charges the screen.

A rushrageboastbang of Light. She shuts her eyes, but feels the harshdireoppressive flameglowflickerflare through her lids.

But after a short while she looks and then there's nothing there. No wildwandering Light,

no terrifying man. She slidebounceshoots outside and slams the door, and waits behind it,

and sings a little louder, louder than the heavy clanking and crashing inside

that is not the familiar tick of the plant marking time, but sounds instead

—

no—yes—no—but—like steel breaking steel, a dream of a sword.

Astrid meets the visietor, Darling

Astrid's sketchan the yoles at a pierheid on Central,
cosh i'the neuk anunder a pilot light,
whan Darling, no lukkan, snappers atwart her, dingan
her styluses ower the skitey deck o the pier.
Thay waatch the gadjets hurl intae the clifts,
Darling speldered intae Astrid's skirt.

Darling's haep o sorries an offers o credit
is as gabsie as Astrid's reassurance is blate.
"I wirno uissan thaim. Better ithoot."
Darling trys tae mak the fykie transietion
fae shock tae blether wi "Are you visiting too?"
an gars somtheen a weys more precious gang.

But wi the offer o tea, Astrid gies
tae Darling whit sheu's waantan: lowses the vouels
in her spaeken, nods an smiles whan Darling yatters
on aboot community, the community,
fills the visietor's lugs wi the new aaldness
o her staetion haem, spaeks whit sheu disno ken.

An eftir, eftir tea turns tae spirits,
kennan her ploys is waatched by ivry lighter
i'the Hoose, cheussan no tae mynd, seean
the meanan o the lunt in Darling's een,
carean that sheu disno care, sheu laaghs
at the dunt o the invitaetion an follows the wife.

Thir touchan's stimmerie joy, trivvlan, agglan,
airtan, error, hixan, delight. Thay both
ken the movs an maan unlairn them noo
fer this new body's waas, windows, doars.
Astrid taks a guff o Mars again,
an Darling, discovry. Thir tongs tak a gless.

Than eftir, whan the cruises brighten tae morneen,
wi Darling yet sleepan, Astrid busks an leuks
fae porthole tae bunk, fae the tide tae Darling's hair,
an speirs o the gods, at dinno exist, if
thir both fund whit thay waant, or need, or no,
or if thir maed hid, or if hid ivver metters.



Astrid meets the visitor, Darling

Astrid is sketching the boats at a pierhead on Central, snugquithappyintimate in the nook under a pilot light, when Darling, not looking, stumblestammers across her, knocking her styluses over the slippery deckfloor of the pier. They watch the gadgets speedthrowrolldrive into the crackchinks, Darling spreadsplitted over Astrid's lap.

Darling's many apologies and offers of credit are as voluble as Astrid's reassurance is shydiffident. "I wasn't using them. Better without." Darling tries to make the trickyfussyrestless transition from shock to talkchatramble with "Are you visiting too?" and causeforces something more precious to go.

But with the offer of tea, Astrid can perform for Darling what she wants: loosens the vowels in her speech, nods and smiles as Darling rambles about community, the community, fills the visitor's ears with the new oldness of her station home, tells her what she doesn't know.

And later, after tea becomes spirits, knowing her actiondecisiongames are watched by every lighter in the House, choosing not to rememberknowreflectwill, seeing the meaning of the flamesparklight in Darling's eyes, caring that she does not care, she laughs at the shockchancestrike of the invitation and follows the woman.

Their touch is stumblestammering joy, fumblefiddling, messdirtconfusion, searchfinding, error, laughhiccuping, delight. They both know the moves and must unlearn them now for this new personbody's walls, windows, doors. Astrid tastes a stinkpuffsnortnonsense of Mars again, and Darling, discovery. Their tongues drink.

Then later, when the lamps brighten to morning, with Darling still asleep, Astrid dressprepares and looks from porthole to bedbunk, from the seatimetide to Darling's hair, and asks of the gods, who do not exist, if they have both found what they want, or need, or not, or if they have created it, or if it ever matters.

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Twa

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Darling an Astrid waatch a Lightstoor

Darling is greetan. "I've never,"
sheu says, "I've never . . ." An Astrid
kens, but canno decide,
seean the stoor o Lights,
the whips, the reid rivan
an gowd glisks, the skyran
dancers ower the curve
o a roilan warld, the dillan,
the braeth, the lithy, the paece,
the dunt as the planet-braid
linkwark o Lights, taegither,
sweys in a stark straik
ower the lip o sight,
whither o no tae say,
"Aye, but I mynd whan I
wir peedie thay wir more."



Darling and Astrid watch a Lightstorm

Darling is weeping. "I've never," she says, "I've never . . ." And Astrid
knows, but can't decide, seeing the stormstrifestrainspeeddust of Lights, the
gustdarttwistattacks, the red wrenchripleaking and gold
glimpsegleampuffthrillscares, the gaudyshining dancers over the curve of a
roiling world, the dimfadedying, the breath, the lullgappath, the peace, the
shockchancestrike as the planet-wide linkwork of Lights, as one,
swerveswingsways in a thickviolent streak, over the edge of sight, whether
or not to say, "Yes, but I rememberknowreflectwill when I was little there
were more."

Inga raeds a airticle aboot the Lights

The swaeran taks Øyvind runnan
fae the kitcheen. “Bastards! Shite-fer-braens!
Fuck.” He pits a jentle haand
on her back an hings ower the screen.

The airticle sheu’s raedan’s aboot
a submission tae the Federal Ting
on the theoretiecal basis an
structural possiebility o

extra-corporeal photon network
consciousness, an the push
fer furdur study. The bigsy heidline’s
white: CAN LIGHTS THINK?

“Can thay fuck!” says Inga. “I dinno
fuckan care if thir fuckan conscious!
or fuckan dansan! or fuckan fuckan!
Fuck!” Tentie, Øyvind trists

her shudder. “I ken,” he says, an sheu,
“Thir juece i’ the drives an that’s maet on the taeble
an hid’s haird enogh tae land a daecent
haal o Light ithoot fuckan

studies an xenobiolojists
an airmchair philosophers
an Fermi fucks!” Inga’s greetan
noo, an Øyvind’s fingers bris

intae her dilderan airms in comfort.
“Alaen,” sheu says. “Can thay no see
wir aye been alaen? Will aye be alaen?”
Øyvind can only reply, “I ken.”



Inga reads an article about the Lights

The swearing brings Øyvind running from the kitchen. “Bastards! Shit-for-brains! Fuck!” He puts a gentle hand on her back and leans over the screen.

The article she’s reading is about a submission to the Federal Council on the theoretical basis and structural possibility of

extra-corporeal photon network consciousness, and the push for further study. The big proud conceited headline is white: CAN LIGHTS THINK?

“Can they fuck!” says Inga, and, “I don’t fucking care if they’re fucking conscious! or fucking dancing! or fucking fucking! Fuck!” Øyvind, careful watchful, squeezes her shoulder.

“I know,” he says, and she, “There’s juice in the drives and that’s foodmeat on the table and it’s hard enough to land a decent haul catch of Light without fucking

studies and xenobiologists and armchair philosophers and Fermi fucks!” Inga’s weeping now, and Øyvind’s fingers squeeze her bruise

her trembling jerking arms in comfort. “Alone,” she says. “Can’t they see we’ve always been alone? Will always be alone?” And Øyvind can only reply, “I know.”

Higgie the Codd seeks expert advice

“Thoo kens aboot this things,” sheu says tae Noor,
as the arkaeolojist gans at the wracks.

“Pardon?” says Noor, than, “No. I’m not a psychologist,”
pittan Higgie’s biss up. “Hid wisno me braens.

A’m no gyte. Hid wis somtheen ither,
somtheen scientific, like thee ships.”

“We don’t know they’re ships,” says Noor, wishan
sheu wis wi thaim noo, “and I don’t see what

they have to do with dreams of ancient swordsmen.”

“Hid wisno a draem! If hid wis a draem,

whit wey is me doars hammered, me screens smashed?

He cam fae nopiece, an back tae nopiece he gaed

an I waant tae ken hoo.” Noor shrugs. “I’ve been with you here
for over a year, and can’t tell you anything real

about my own work, let alone armoured men
appearing from the ether. But,” sheu adds,

sofnan, seean madram turn tae pickloo,
feelan hid fillan her crampit, caald offiece,

no waantan tae aye be away oot the edge o the Wheel,

“You’ve mynded me on about reports of not

unrelated incidents on other
inner stations. Distance, isolation,

collective realities, et cetera.

I’ve got some papers here.” “A’m tellan thee,”

says Higgle, thight, “hid isno a braen thing.
Hid’s a time thing. Thoo keep thee paepers,
an tell me whar tae raed aboot time.” Sheu’s siccar
wi a dizzen decades o haadan an spaekan her mind.
So Noor swipes ower the naems o enogh paepers
in speculative temporal mechanics
tae keep the injineer occupyd,
tae keep her, Noor lippens, fae coman back fer weeks,
an burns a few o thaim tae her awn slaet
tae amause hersel whan sheu’s notheen tae deu.



Higgle the Coder seeks expert advice

“You know about these things,” she says to Noor, as the archaeologist staregazyawns out at the wrecks.

“Pardon?” says Noor, then, “No. I’m not a psychologist,” raising Higgle’s hackles. “It wasn’t in my head.

I’m not crazy. It was something else, something scientific, like your ships.”

“We don’t know they’re ships,” says Noor, wishing she was with them now, “and I don’t see what

they have to do with dreams of ancient swordsmen.” “It wasn’t a dream! If it was a dream,

whathowwherewhy are my doors hammered, my screens all smashed? He came from nowhere, and he went back to nowhere

and I want to know how.” Noor shrugs. “I’ve been with you here for over a year, and can’t tell you anything real

about my own work, let alone armoured men appearing from the ether. But,” she adds,

softening, seeing rage and trouble and grief turn to panic, feeling it filling her cramped, cold office,

not wanting to always be away out on the edge of the Wheel, “You’ve reminded me about reports of not

unrelated incidents on other inner stations. Distance, isolation, collective realities, et cetera. I have some papers here.” “I’m telling you,”

says Higgle, tight-lipped, “it’s not a brain thing. It’s a time thing. Keep your papers,

and tell me where to read about time.” Higgle’s stable severe steadfast from a dozen decades of holding and speaking her mind.

So Noor swipes over the names of enough papers in speculative temporal mechanics

to keep the engineer occupied, to keep her, Noor expects, from coming back for weeks,

and downloads a few of them to her own slate to amuse herself when she has nothing to do.

Eynar snecks up

The widden worm sails trou the Hoose's waas.
No wi a skirpan o steel an a sprettan o ruives,
but trou, like a laser wi flesh, a neutrino wi
a planet, a ganfer wi a iron doar.

Eynar wis stackan chairs an moppan the deck.
The baest cam fae ahint. Hearan a knark,
he golders, "Closed!" an turns an sees the mulls
shaan the teeth. The worm is broon an shinan,

an on hids back twa dizzen rootan fock.
Hids face is frozen. Hids reid weengs dunder.
An Light maks reefu plays alang hids lent,
hids shields an graith an reeg an fock alowe.

Eynar skreks. The sealess ship flees trou
the next waa, no laevan a sign the Hoose
an hids man is willan at haem: notheen unless
a cuppid bucket an a reek o saalt.



Eynar closes up

The wooden snakedragonworm sails through the walls of the House.
Not with a ripsqueaktearing of steel and a startstripburstjumping of rivets,
but through, like a laser with flesh, a neutrino with a planet, an omenghost
with an iron door.

Eynar was stacking chairs and mopping the floor. The animalmonster
came from behind. Hearing a creakcrackcrunch, he yelllaughroars,
"Closed!" and turns and sees the lips baring the teeth. The
snakedragonworm is brown and shining,

and on its back are two dozen roarbellowing people. Its face is frozen. Its red wings rumblebeatthunder. And Light makes madfuriosfrenzied plays along its length, its shields and gear and rigging and people flameglowflickerflaring.

Eynar screeches. The sealess ship flies through the next wall, leaving no sign the House and its man are lostwildwandering at home: nothing except an overturned bucket and a stinksmoke of salt.

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Darling an Astrid tak a waak trou the wynds o Meginwick

The wynds is lit by cruises set
tae Stannart Days, peedie suns

i'the girders lightan thir steps. Thay waak
the nerrow weys o Astrid's myndeen.

Roon this cunyo, the skeul; roon this,
the bruck byres, whar Astrid's blide

tae spy young fock is gloweran yet;
further, the bell thay'd gang tae in pairs;

here, the Haa whar the wynds meet,
whar the Ting sets fees an lots thir quaaters,

whar benks is shuitten back fer dansan.
Darling trys tae listen, but

hid's that peedie, an bye the waas
is the tide, the starns, an aalwarld things.

Thir haands sweeng closs, touch, twine,
pull back, touch more. An than: "Astrid?"

Thay birl, touchan yet, but Astrid
steps away an the uncan body

says, "Hid's nivver thee?" The body
is Gunnie, at twal year ago wis Astrid's

inseparable freend, at ten year ago
gat nyargie, an thir no spocken ava

fae Astrid teuk the langship tae Mars.
"An wha's this?" speirs Gunnie, smirkan.

Thay wir snatchets o bairns, but Gunnie
is wallie nou wi shairp dairk een

an Astrid's forgotten hoo tae deu this.
Sheu swanders trou speiran at Gunnie's faimly,

giean her news, myndan on only
tae share the things sheu's fine wi aa

the fock aa ower the staetion hearan
in twatree oor, or mibbe less.

Darling waatches the clashan pair,
no unnerstannan enogh tae spaek,

smilan but feelan a ropp hank aff
as sheu faas backleens intae space.

An Astrid's soondan appen, but keeps
her innerly nirts gairded. Sheu smiles,

promieses thay'll spaek, cheerios,
an firm taks Darling's bombazed haand.



Darling and Astrid take a walk through the corridors of Meginwick

The corridors are lit by lamps set to Standard Days, little suns
in the girders lighting their steps. They walk the narrow ways of
Astrid's giftremembrancememory.

Round this cornernook, the school; round this, the rubbishscrap barns,
where Astrid is happyfondpleased

to seespot young people still scowlstaring; further, the bubblebell they'd
go to in pairs;

here, the Hall where the corridors meet, where the Council sets
wagesprices drawallocates quarters,
where benchshelves are shoved back for dances. Darling tries to listen,
but
it's so little, and just through these walls is the seatimetime, the stars,
and things from an older world.
Their hands swing close, touch, entwine, pull back, touch more. And
then: "Astrid?"
They whirlrushdancespin, still touching, but Astrid steps away and the
strangerweird personbody
says, "That's never you?" The personbody is Gunnie, who twelve years
ago was Astrid's
inseparable friend, who ten years ago got tiregrumbleboring, and they
haven't spoken at all
since Astrid took the longship to Mars. "And who's this?" asks Gunnie,
smiling.
They were punyworthlessrascally children, but Gunnie now is
bighealthybeautiful with sharp dark eyes,
and Astrid has forgotten how to do this. She stumblewanders through
asking after Gunnie's family,
giving her news, rememberknowreflectwilling only to share the things
she doesn't mind
the people all over the station hearing within a few hours, maybe less.
Darling watches the noisygossiping pair, not understanding enough to
speak,
smiling but feeling a rope uncoil as she falls backwards into space.
And Astrid sounds open, but keeps her
inmostshelteredintimateaffectionate crumbknots guarded. She smiles,
promises they'll speak, says goodbye, and firmly takes Darling's
bewilderstupified hand.

Thay spaek aboot Mars

“So wha’s thee fock?” speirs Astrid, but Darling’s reply is, “Boring! You don’t want to know.” “Thoo kens mine!” says Astrid, but things wi them is ower caller fer her tae be a needle or a hammer. “Whar’d ye bide, than?”

Darling describes the muckle domms an tooers o Chryse, weel enogh tae be convinceen, aboothaans wi true. Astrid kieks a eebroo, fer Chryse wis ower gowd an gated fer Astrid’s toosie college crood.

“A’m only seen hid fae apae Ascraeus. Hid’s a peedie bit peedier fae thir.” Darling snushes. “Too peedie for me. This is more my size.” Sheu spraeds her airms, raxan oot the tap o the mintie taing o the mintie staetion,

tae haad twa meuns an a normous o starns. “I miss it,” says Astrid, an Darling’s ferly paalled. “Hid’s true. No jeust me freends, but bidan somepiece I could be . . .” “Be what?” “Be onybody. Or no mesel. Or jeust no hiv tae be.

Oot thir, wi that pile o fock, that gret a lot tae deu, thoo disno hiv tae be.” Darling haads her haand. “But you still liked to climb the highest mountains in the solar system?” “Yass. Else hid wis gey haird tae see.”



They speak about Mars

“So, tell me about your family,” asks Astrid, but Darling’s reply is, “Boring! You don’t want to know.” “You know about mine!” says Astrid, but things between them are too freshcleanhealthy for her to be a needle or a hammer. “Where did you waitstaylive, then?”

Darling describes the greatbig domes and towers of Chryse, well enough to be convincing, close to the truth. Astrid kicks an eyebrow, because Chryse was far too wealthy and gated for Astrid’s roughshaggyrowdy college crowd.

“I’ve only seen it from up on Ascræus. It’s a lot littler from there.” Darling snorts. “Too little for me. This is more my size.” She spreads her arms, stretchreachexpanding out of the top of the tiny promontory of the tiny station,

to hold two moons and a huge number of stars. “I miss it,” says Astrid, and Darling’s veryfairly astonishthwarted. “It’s true. Not just my friends, but waitstayliving somewhere I could be . . .” “Be what?” “Be anybody. Or not myself. Or just not have to be.

Out there, with too many people, so much to do, you don’t have to be.” Darling holds her hand. “But you still liked to climb the highest mountains in the solar system?” “Yes. Otherwise it was pretty hard to see.”

Inga an Olaf spaek bisness

“Whit like, beuy?” sheu says.
Sheu kens fine weel whit like.
Olaf is by fer his tea,
an sits ithoot drinkan or spaekan.

Sheu taks a haad o the wheel.
“Thoo’re thinkan A’m wirkan the bott
an the crew ower haird.” He spreets.
“Hid isno jeust aboot me!

Fer A’m gotten me bairn,
an hid’s jeust me thir gotten,
an Erlend is haen his third,
an Erika’s parent’s no weel,

an Ingrid—” “Deus thoo no think
A’m kennan that? We canno—”
“We canno gang oot ivry day!”
Olaf is ferly gowlan.

“We can an we maan,” says Inga,
“or whit’ll thee bairn aet,
or Erlend’s, or Erika’s parent?
Is hid no creches an nurses

whan wiss wi bairns maan wirk?”
“Is hid no common stores
whan thee credits is thin?”
he snashes, an Inga gets quiet

an sad. “Hid isno me,”
sheu says. “Hid’s Orcadia.
The Ting kens whit’s coman.
If thoo an me tak noo,

thir'll be notheen next year,
or eftir, whan the Lights
is anteran, an the shippeen,
an aa wir needan tae bide.

Wir wirkan while we can."
Quiet, but haird. Olaf's
tea is caald. "Hid isno
that bad," he says, but hid is.



Inga and Olaf talk business

"What's going on, friendmanboy?" she says. She knows perfectly well what's going on. Olaf has come to her for tea, and sits without drinking or speaking.

She takes charge. "You think I'm working the ship and the crew too hard." He startstripburstjumps. "It's not just me!

Because I have my baby, and they've only got me, and Erlend has had his third, and Erika's parent is sick,

and Ingrid—"Don't you think I know? We can't—" "We can't go out every day!" Olaf is really bellowcrying.

"We can and we must," Inga says, "or what will your babychild eat, or Erlend's, or Erika's parent? Aren't there creches and nurses

when those of us with children have to work?" "Aren't there common stores when you're short on credits?" he snapbites, and Inga grows quiet

and sad. "It's not me," she says. "It's Orcadia. The Council knows what's coming. If you and I take now,

there will be nothing next year, or later, when the Lights are rareunusual, and the shipping, and everything we need to waitstaylive.

We're working while we can." Quiet, but hard. Olaf's tea is cold. "It's not that bad," he says, but it is.

Astrid casts back tae a pal fae the college

The cast sheu gits by slow packet is pangit
wi sarcasm. Whit like is sheu noo i'the inner
wylds? Is sheu been reprogrammed yet
by the spacers? Deus sheu mynd whit like is the taste
o a gress-fed staek? Whit like is the yird o Mars?

Whit like is the smell o caller air? The bizz
o her jack pluggid in tae civiliesaction?
Hoo tae dance? The election, the sit-in, the mairch?
Her social credits is plumman the reid; jeust whit
deus sheu think sheu's deuan? Whan wad sheu come haem?

Astrid gans intae the lens o her caster
an sends afyoag o a laagh tae the funs, hersel,
her haem, an yaps aboot the tarf an retro
chairm o astro-industrial arkietecture
an hoo the yotun's yallo swaalls her braeth.

Sheu smiles an lees aboot the space o space,
an hoo sheu's deuan that grand a wark oot here.
(Her slaet bides teum yet; the vacuums atween
the biggeens o Deep Wheel Orcadia fill
o traffic, industry, mynd, wirds and waith.)

An than sheu says, "Listen," an records the deep
mum o Aikeray's injines, the bed an baet
o aa her life. An than sheu says, "Thoo
shoud come," if only tae insense hersel
thir onythen here that sheu coud ivver share.



Astrid casts back to a friend from art school

The message she receives by slow packet is fullbursting with sarcasm. How is she doing now in the inner wilds? Has she been reprogrammed yet by the spacers? Does she rememberknowreflectwill how a grass-fed steak tastes? How Mars' groundworldsoil feels?

How freshcleanhealthy air smells? The buzzbustle of her jack plugged in to civilisation? How to dance? The election, the sit-in, the march? Her social credits are plumbing the red; just what does she think she is doing? When would she come home?

Astrid staregazeyawns into the lens of her caster and sends a big laugh at the jokegames, herself, her home, and talknagbarks about the harshbitter and retro charm of astro-industrial architecture, and how the gas giant's yellow swellwaves her breath.

She smiles and lies about the space of space, and how she does so much work out here. (Her slate waitstaylives emptyhungry still; the vacuums between the structures of Deep Wheel Orcadia are full of traffic, industry, memorythoughtmeaning, words and flotsamstrays.)

And then she says, "Listen," and records the deep hummumblewhisperword of Aikeray's engines, the bed and rhythm of all her life. And then she says, "You should come," if only to convinceimpress herself that there's anything here that she could ever share.

Darling jacks the news

Sheu wun tae twa day afore lukkan. Days o paece,
forgettan, pretendan sheu wisno traikid by histry
(or faimly, whit's aye the sam thing). An paece is grand,
but the coorse yeuk tae ken if paece is true
or no, an if hid's gaan tae end, returns.
Sheu digs intae her pack fer the vacuum gansey,
unhaps her bauchelt pod an jacks hid in.

This weys in the data transfer's driltan –
enerjy's dear fer aa thay mak hid here –
an whan the infodump is deun hid's like
a patchwark: twa-month-aald reports comed oot
by slow packets, hilligo advertiseens
an feenty news by faast packets, an only
urjent bulletins by ansible.

The loup tae haaf has ferfil gien the lie
tae infienit informaetion alwis on,
an hid's waant. An noo sheu disno care whit's on
on Mars, ivry teullyo maed wanwirt
by space an time. The rampan wirts atween
the ooter Nordren Fed an Angle colonies
is that closs tae claikan sheu jeust ignores thaim.

Sheu ransels instaed fer her aald naem an face.
Whan thir notheen new – jeust the sam
thraets an offers tae thieves an arbitraetors,
ithoot a witter o roon whit wan o the starns
sheu's birlan noo – sheu shills her peedie pod,
happan hids cell in a sark, hids screen in anither.
Hid isno paece, but hid's somtheen closs.



Darling plugs into the news

She reachtravelachieved two days before looking. Days of peace, forgetting, pretending she wasn't trudgetrackexhausted by history (or family, which is always the same thing). And peace is goodbig, but the roughhardnasty itch to know if peace is true or not, and if it's going to end, returns. She digs into her pack for the vacuum sweaterjersey, unwrapcoverbundles her wornroughdiscarded pod and plugs it in.

This far in the data transfer is slowdreamdawdling – energy's expensive even though they make it here – and when the infodump is done it's like a patchwork: two-month-old reports delivered by slow packets, flightygiddynoisycrazy adverts and cursednothing news by fast packets, and only urgent bulletins by ansible.

The jumpspringvault to deep space has veryfearfully given the lie to infinite information always on, and its wantneed. And now she doesn't care what's happening on Mars, every fightbroilstruggle made worthless by space and time. The simmersputtermuddlefussing words between outer Northern Federation and Angle colonies are so close to gossipclucking she just ignores them.

She searchsnoopransacks instead for her old name and face. When there's nothing new – just the same threats and threatoffers to thieves and arbitrators, without any signguideknowingfishhook of round which of the stars she's whirlrushdancespinning now – she husks her little pod, wrapcoverbundling its power source in a shirt and its screen in another. It's not peace, but it's something close.

Noor needs a drink

“Yir no come by ower affens,” says Eynar, away.
Noor sits hersel alaen at the bar. “My loss,”
sheu says. “I thought I should get to know folk better.”
“Thir no ower much tae ken.” Noor flenches an poors

her uncan discomfort intae her soor drink.
Eynar sees an relents. “Whit like’s yir wracks?”
“Big,” sheu says. “Blank,” sheu says. “Empty.” An flenches again
at hoo sheu’s lairned hid’s ferfil grand tae be soor.

Abasht, sheu blethers on, sayan hoo
hid’s gey bonnie here, hoo sheu loves it,
the coothie fock, and Eynar listens, ootward,
noddan. “No bad, ya, hid isno bad.”

Noor disno see the barman’s worm-taen widdrim
so sheu asks if Eynar is thowt o flittan,
ivver waanted tae bide somepiece ither.
The quaistion skites aff his slite an cuttit wirts.

“Hid’ll deu.” “We deu fine.” “No bad.”
Thir quiet a piece. He poors, sheu drinks, thay smile.
An a thowt comes tae Eynar at waarms him, o somtheen
he coud share wi this bonnie aakward body.

“If thoo waants tae ken fock better, come
tae the Dance Firstday next. Hid’s wiss at wir best.”
Noor coudno, sheu didno, sheu wadno want tae impose,
disno think sheu’d be walcome, canno dance,

but Eynar’s insistan wi more an more blide wirts
as ony gien the night. Forbye, Noor waants
tae gang, an dance. Whan sheu’s finished her drink,
he asks, “A’ll see thee thir?” an Noor says, “Yass.”



Noor needs a drink

“You haven’t visited much,” says Eynar, awaydeaddistracted. Noor sits by herself at the bar. “My loss,” she says. “I thought I should get to know folk better.” “There’s not too much to know.” Noor shiftflinches and pours

her strangerweird discomfort into her sourbitterrudemiserable drink. Eynar sees and relents. “How are your wrecks?” “Big,” she says. “Blank,” she says. “Empty.” And shiftflinches again at how she’s learned that it’s veryfearfully goodbig to be sourbitterrudemiserable.

Abashed, she talkchatrambles on, saying how it’s pretty finepretty here, how she loves it, the friendlycomfortablepleasantunthreatening folk, and Eynar listens, outwardreserveddistant, nodding. “Not bad, yes, it’s not bad.”

Noor doesn’t see the barman’s worm-brought nightmaredazeconfusion, so she asks if Eynar ever thought of leaveflyescaping, ever wanted to waitstaylive somewhere else. The question slidebounceshoots off his smoothstilllevel and cutcurt words.

“It’ll do.” “We do well enough.” “Not bad.” They are quiet for a placedistancepartwhile. He pours, she drinks, they smile. And a thought comes to Eynar that warms him, of something he could share with this finepretty awkward personbody.

“If you want to know us folk better, come to the Dance next Firstday. It’s us at our best.” Noor couldn’t, she didn’t, she wouldn’t want to impose, doesn’t think she’d be welcome, can’t dance,

but Eynar’s insisting with more and more happyfondpleased words than any he’s offered all night. Besides, Noor wants to go, and dance. When she’s finished her drink, he asks, “I’ll see you there?” and Noor says, “Yes.”

Øyvind's notions

Whan he's alaen,
the young eens gaen
or no assigned,

he taks a key
tae a private store
at's pangit wi maet.

The day, he curses:
The maet's green.
Øyvind sceups

the protein ashets
intae the chemiecal
reclamaetor,

pernickety, dights
wi sterile pads
tae stairt again.

The maet smoothy's
against the chance
o contamienation

or ony gokkan
o his notions.
Orcadia's maet

is weel-trusted:
why pret wi that?
The future's coman.

He's gotten somtheen
new – whan
the mix is right.

He disno think
tae chaenge the warld,
jeust waants tae plaese

his awn tongue.
He sets tae blendan
anither batch.



Øyvind's ideaexperimentinventions

When he's alone, the young ones gone or not assigned,
he takes a key to a private store that's fullbursting with foodmeat.
Today, he curses: the foodmeat is green. Øyvind scoops
the protein serving dishes into the chemical reclamator,
precisefussy, cleanwipes with sterile pads to start again.
The foodmeat hidey-hole is against the chancerisk of contamination
or any mockjokepranking at his ideaexperimentinventions. Orcadia's
maet

is well-trusted: why tamperplay with that? The future's coming.
He has something new – when the mix is right.
He doesn't think about changing the world, just wantneeds to please
his own tongue. He starts to blend another batch.

Astrid lairns Darling a new dance

Astrid kent this steps afore sheu coud spaek
(sheu wis a backerly spaeker): her mither held her
in fierdy airms an birled her roon an roon
the center o the Haa wi couples hurlan by.

Noo Astrid's haadan Darling wi siclike a grip
an coonts the dance's steps as meusic fills
the teum Ting Haa. Thir gotten a len
o twatree oor tae mak the visietor raedy.

Darling's laaghan. This dances is stootly ither
as whit she kens fae Mars. Thir no the perjink,
jenteel traed, traety an espionage
o her faithers' Chryse corporate functions. Thir no

the sensory-seutid low-gravity raves
apae Olympus Mons, cuithins will-willan
wi meusic in thir helmets, naeraboos
unteddert fae the reid an hirsty grund.

Sheu's lairnan noo tae mov her feet faaster,
wi aese an virr, an catchan noo the guff
o Astrid's sweit, an her awn. *Turn*, sheu thinks,
one-and-two-and-clap. "That's hid. No bad."



Astrid teaches Darling a new dance

Astrid knew these steps before she could speak (she was a lateslow
speaker: her mother held her in strongbriskworthy arms and
whirlrushspindanced her round and round the centre of the Hall, couples
speedthrowrolldriving by.

Now Astrid holds Darling with the same grip and counts the dance's steps as music fills the emptyhungry Council Hall. They've borrowed a few hours to make the visitor ready.

Darling's laughing. These dances are verystoutly different from what she knows from Mars. They're not the primprecise and genteel trade, treaties and espionage of her fathers' Chryse corporate functions, nor

the sensory-suited low-gravity raves up on Olympus Mons, immaturecoalfishrascals mind-wandering to the music in their helmets, nearly untethered from the red and drybarrenstony ground.

Now she's learning to move her feet faster, with ease and vigourwhirr, and now she's smellcatching the stinkpuffsnortnonsense of Astrid's sweat and her own. *Turn*, she thinks, *one-and-two-and-clap*. "That's it. Not bad."

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Astrid taks Darling haem fer dinner

“This is me new freend” – an the layers in “freend”
isno ferly clear an’ll no be explaened.

Darling is winsome noo; sheu’s somtheen ither
as the skarr thing o a toorist Astrid met.

A smile in her fernteckled face, rorie claes.
I’the mids o this faimly hid’s like her body is lowan.

Mibbe the thowt o parents luntit performance.
Wi Darling’s silence aboot her awn faithers,

Astrid’s ower thankful fer Inga an Øyvind’s
maet an kindness – until fair intae the meal

sheu hears thir vooels roondan, thir consonants clippan,
thir wirds sweetchan tae marry Darling’s awn,

an gits unspaekable barman. An whan her awn
“een” is “one” sheu sits quiet, waantan

a body tae notiece, her mither tae smile an say “Buddo”
an tak her back tae the aald faimly taeble,

but the hairt o Astrid’s silence haes aafil gravity,
an so the conversaetion is faggan, faan,

is hearan hidsel, is less an less real gittan,
til hid’s jeust Darling at’s smilan an spaekan yet.



Astrid takes Darling home for dinner

“This is my new friend” – and the layers in “friend” really aren’t clear and won’t be explained.

Darling is charmingattractive now: she’s something other than the frightenednervous tourist Astrid met.

A smile in her freckled face, brightloud clothes. Among this family it’s like her personbody is flameglowflickerflaring.

Maybe the thought of parents flamelightsparked performance. With Darling’s silence about her own fathers,

Astrid’s very grateful for Inga and Øyvind’s foodmeat and kindness – until well into the meal

she hears their vowels rounding, their consonants clipping, their words switching to matchequalmate Darling’s own,

and becomes unspeakably ragefrothseething. And when her own “een” is “one” she goes quiet, wantneeding

someone to notice, her mother to smile and say “FriendChildLove” and with it bring her back to the old family table,

but the heart of Astrid’s silence has awful gravity, and so the conversation driftfailflags, falls,

hears itself, grows less and less real, till it’s only Darling who’s still smiling and speaking.

Young Brenna at the Ting

Brenna's speechifyan. Sheu chants aboot the inherent inequalities o the interstellar economy, whit wey the extractive industrial laebor relaetions in Light production noo require a radiecal reimagienation o Orcadia's pouer, whit wey the FtL drive wisno a thraet, but a opportunity tae shaa the galaxy whit wey tae wirk a better wey. Sheu spaeks gey weel. Sheu wis been practiesan her argiements fer weeks.

"Lass, thanks fer that," says Unn, the aaldest thir, an aye the Chair thay dinno hiv. "Noo, the stores—" "Haad on!" Brenna golders, horrid reid gittan. "Ir we no gaan tae discuss whit A'm spaekan aboot?" "Yass, yass," says Unn, coothie an blide. "Wha's gotten somtheen thir waantan or needan tae say cheust noo tae Brenna's clivver notions?" The fill Haa is dainty silent. An silent yet. Brenna didno ken tae practiese fer this, an Unn is practiesed aa thir life. Unn hoasts. "Noo, the stores . . ."



Brenna at the Council

Brenna's making a speech. She speaks affectedly about the inherent inequalities of the interstellar economy, whathowwherewhy the extractive industrial labour relations in Light production now require a radical reimagination of Orcadia's power, about whathowwherewhy the Faster-than-Light drive wasn't a threat but an opportunity to showpass the galaxy whathowwherewhy to work a better way. She speaks pretty well. She has been practising her arguments for weeks.

"Girlwoman, thanks for that," says Unn, the oldest there and always the Chair they don't have. "Now, the stores—" "Hold on!" Brenna

yelllaughroars, growing veryhorribly red already. “Aren’t we going to discuss what I’m talking about?” “Yes, yes,” says Unn, friendlycomfortablepleasantunthreatening and happyfondpleased. “Who has something they wantneed to say now to Brenna’s very quickintelligent ideaexperimentinventions?” The wholefull Hall is verydaintily silent. And stays silent. Brenna didn’t know to practise for this, and Unn has practised all their life. Unn coughharrumphclears. “Now, the stores . . .”

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Noor an Eynar spaek eftir the Ting

“I sayed tae see wiss at wir best,
no this,” he says. Noor wis waatched
the meeteen, takkan notts. Sheu laaghs.
“It’s better than a research committee.”

Eynar’s heid is tiftan fae ringan
an rallyan debate. “A’d tak a vott
instaed o this some days,” he says,
an shrugs. Thay taak a waak i’ the wynds.

“I wouldn’t,” says Noor. “At least you try
to build consensus, make things fair.”
“Oh yass,” says Eynar, an Noor kens noo
this ferly disno mean agreement.

“I doot thir no a system coud copp
wi whit this days is takkan wiss.”
The Ting wis biggid fer manajan stocks,
resolvan contracks. Hids bleudiest wark

wis exile, no the ruinaetion
o tekno-economic chaenge.
“Is that why you didn’t speak?” asks Noor.
“A’ll spaek whan A’m gotten somtheen tae offer,”

he says, “an that’ll no be till A’m—eh . . .”
He steps an leuks away. “Until . . . ?”
“Ach, na. We’re here.” Thir by the Hoose.
Noor feels sheu’s missan somtheen important

but feels that ivry day. The big man
leuks as lost as her. “Thoo’re no
pit aff?” Sheu shaks her heid an smiles.
The invitaetion is somtheen new.

“But you’ll have to teach me the steps,” sheu says,
an waves a cheerio. Thir fock
waitan fer Eynar tae tak the drinks
fer the unofficial second meeteen.

Ivry ee is on the pair.
“Ach, wheesht,” says Eynar, ahint the bar.
The goldereen’s aither a anchor or
a hurlan wind. He taks the drinks.



Noor and Eynar speak after the Council

“I said to see us at our best, not this,” he says. Noor had watched the meeting, taking notes. She laughs. “It’s better than a research committee.”

Eynar’s head is throbfestering from ringcirclebanging, crowdquarrellurching debate. “I’d take a vote instead of this sometimes,” he says, and shrugs. They go for a walk in the corridors.

“I wouldn’t,” says Noor. “At least you try to build consensus, make things fair. “Oh yes,” says Eynar, and Noor knows now this definitely doesn’t mean agreement.

“I expect there isn’t any system that could cope with what these days hold for us.” The Council was built for managing stocks, resolving contracts. Its hardestbloodiest worktask

was exile, not the ruination of techno-economic change. “Is that why you didn’t speak?” asks Noor. “I’ll speak when I have something to offer,”

he says, “And that won’t be until I am—um . . .” He stops and looks away. “Until . . . ?” “Ach, no. We’re here.” They’re by the House. Noor feels like she’s missed something important,

but feels like that every day. The big man looks as lost as her. “You’re not put off?” She shakes her head and smiles. The invitation is something new.

“But you’ll have to teach me the steps,” she says, and waves goodbye. There are people waiting for Eynar to bring the drinks for the unofficial

second meeting.

Every eye is on the pair. “Oh, shut up,” says Eynar, behind the bar. The yell laughroaring is either an anchor or a speedthrowroll driving wind. He brings the drinks.

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Darling's body

In her bunk wi Astrid lyan asleep, Darling thinks
about her body an whit sheu's waantid aa her life,

an whit sheu's gotten noo. Hid wisno ower haird,
aence sheu'd left her faithers' want o corporate sons.

The maet o this transietion wis kent langsinsyne,
nae bother fer mosst o space, like jacks an limb extenders

an aa the bruck o bidan i'the varse, but sheu wis cursed
wi the wrang kinno faimly on the wrang kinno yird,

reclaimed fae regolith tae growe a fantasy
o pooer an no her awn confoodan sel. But noo,

happan her airms aroon her nesh body sheu's feart
sheu's draeman yet, that whit sheu's touchan wilno stey

whan sheu wakkens, a fossil fear as oot o time
as ony baest o ony presairve o Eart. Her body,

here, noo, shoudno be bidan in aald wirds,
but hid is. Unless – an this is the true an muckle fear –

whan Astrid's touchan her, whan Astrid casts a airm
ower her more-as-Martian skin. Whit maan it mean,

tae only ken thee body whan hid's wi anither?
An deus hid ivver mean onytheen ither as grief?



Darling's body

In her bedbunk with Astrid lying asleep, Darling thinks about her body and what she's wanted all her life,

and what she has now. It wasn't that hard, once she'd left her fathers' wantneed of corporate sons.

The foodmeat of this transition was long since known, no problem for most of space, like jacks and limb extenders

and all the rubbishscrap of waitstayliving in the universe, but she was cursed with the wrong sort of family on the wrong sort of groundworldsoil,

reclaimed from regolith to grow a fantasy of power and not her own confounding self. But now,

wrapcoverbundling her arms around her softtenderhealing body she's scared she's dreaming still, that what she's touching can't stay

when she wakes, a fossil fear as out of time as any animalmonster of any preserve o Earth. Her body,

here, now, shouldn't be waitstayliving in old words, but it is. Except – and this is the true and greatbig fear –

when Astrid's touching her, when Astrid slings an arm across her more-than-Martian skin. What must it mean,

to only know your body when it's with another? And does it ever mean anything other than grief?

Astrid canno draa yet

Hid isno that sheu isno
makkan time. Even
wi Darling, sheu's as faithfu

wi her slaets as faithless
wi the kirk, an reglar
as the yotun's spin.

But notheen comes at.
Sheu's draan the full ring
o the staetion, an sheu's draan

the peedie skiffs at sail
atween hids ooter airms
an substaetion bolas:

but, puckle or muckle,
whither sheu's ramstam or huily,
whitivver hid is sheu's draan

hid's bruck. On Mars sheu caad
the shaeds o the yotun, the staens
o a meun, the dwangs o haem,

an wun the top mairks
an tutors' admieraetion.
Sheu canno leuk at yin noo.

An sheu wis nivver keen
on portraiture, but
this morneen sheu's wakkened aerly

in Darling's room abeun
the Hoose, an so sheu draas
the bonnie visietor sleepan.

The aald exercises
 come tae her fingers
 an noo sheu feels the glegness

sheu's missed aa this weeks.
 Astrid staps an pits
 aside the sketch an draas

fae memory the islans
 o the Argyre Sea.
 The more thir aesy an bonnie,

the more her uim growes,
 whill the traitor stylus
 naeraboot snaps in her haand.



Astrid still can't draw

It's not that she's not making time. Even with Darling, she's as faithful
with her slates as faithless with the church, and regular as the gas giant's
spin.

But nothing works out well. She's drawn the full ring of the station, and
drawn

 the little skiffs that sail between its outer arms and substation bolas:
 but, grainsmall or greatbig, whether she's carelessheadstrongspeedy or
carefulslowgentle, whatever it is she's drawn,

 it's rubbishscrap. On Mars she callherded the colours of the gas giant,
the stones of a moon, the struttoilstrains of home,

 and won the top marks and tutors' admiration. She can't look at those
now.

And she was never keen on portraiture, but this morning she's woken
early

in Darling's room above the House, and so she draws the finepretty visitor asleep.

The old exercises come to her fingers and she feels the alertquickkeensmoothness

she's missed all these weeks. Astrid stops and puts the sketch aside and draws

from memory the islands of the Argyre Sea. The more they are easy and finepretty,

the more her heatragemadness grows, until the traitor stylus nearly snaps in her hand.

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Gossip is Orcadia's craesh

thinks Margit, waatchan her smoosie bairn
an Higgie the Codd both tell her aa
sheu needs tae ken an plenty sheu disno.

Sheu smiles an offers twatree wirds
tae seem sheu's gien the sam as sheu's taen.

Margit's played this gaem fer years,
an Gunnie's gey young tae ken the rules,
an Higgie's gey aald tae bither noo.

Sheu drifts whan Gunnie reevles aboot
Astrid an the toorist, fer yin
sheu saa hersel, an mibbe wis kent
the meenit the pair o thaim landed. So whan
Higgie says, "Hid's no jeust me,"
Margit disno ken whit sheu means.
But Higgie's untentie gittan, sheu haes
a waant o tellan, a waant tae be haerd.

"Eynar is seen hid an aa, an Aslaug
wadno spaek aboot hid, but
A'm haerd her offiece wis horrid messed
on Thirdday by. Hid's somtheen tae deu
wi the Lights. Wir seen. But dinno tell,"
sheu says, more feart, gramsan thir airms.
"Dinno tell, fer I canno thole
fock sayan A'm gyte." Her een is weet.

Margit kens her meaneen. Affens
fock say "dinno tell" tae say
"tell aabody, so I dinno hiv tae",
but affens, "keep thee tong sneckid."
Margit kens whit wey hid is,
an locks in Higgie's news wi ither
news sheu's lockid in, so sheu

can lock in whar the meaneen bides.



Gossip is Orcadia's greasefat

thinks Margit, watching her nosy child and Higgie the Coder both tell her all she needs to know and plenty that she doesn't. She smiles and offers a few words so it seems she's given the same as she's taken. Margit's played this game for years, and Gunnie's pretty young to know the rules and Higgie's pretty old to bother now.

She drifts when Gunnie chatterprattles about Astrid and the tourist, because she'd seen that herself, and had probably known the minute they both landed. So when Higgie says, "It's not just me," Margit doesn't know what she means. But Higgie's become uncarefulwatchful, she wantneeds to tell, wantneeds to be heard.

"Eynar saw it too, and Aslaug wouldn't speak about it, but I heard her office was veryhorribly messed up last Thirdday. It's something to do with the Lights. We've seen. But don't tell," she says, more scared, snatchgrabbing their arms. "Don't tell, because I can't stand folk saying I'm crazy." Her eyes are wetrain.

Margit knows what she means. Often, people say "don't tell" to mean "tell everybody, so I don't have to", but often, "keep your tongue on the latch." Margit knows whathowwherewhy it is, and locks in Higgie's news with other news she's locked in, so she can lock in where the meaning waitstaylives.

Gunnie Margitsbairn canno keep a secret

“Higgie’s clean gyte,” thay say. Brenna is soor
fae her failure at the Ting, an says,
“Sheu isno the only een. Erlend telt me
a uncan min in some sort o siller robb
speired him fer the time, an saantit, an Sigurd
saa tree fock like aalwarld cosmonaats,
flags an aa, chappan at his airlock,
an Auga says—” she disno tak a braeth
“—thir seean ships i’ the rouk wi drives at isno
been invented.” “Aye. Gyte,” says Gunnie,
shakkan thir heid an sighan, aafil sad,
an Brenna says, “False consciousness.” “Whit?”

“Thay canno right accept whit maan be deun,
so thir tellan tael instaed.” “Yass, yass,
thir gyte.” Gunnie gies her airm a dunt,
waantan tae haad hid, kennan sheu’s raedy tae cup
intae her awn kinno ree, an naeraboot waantan
tae loup in ahint. Oot the screen, the spin
o Orcadia turns thaim tae the haaf, away
fae the gowd leam o the yotun. The wynd mirkens.
“Hid’s like thir waantan wir piece tae dee,” says Brenna,
an Gunnie’s bithert thirsel at that. “Na, na,”
thay say, ower quiet. “Thir jeust no sure
whit’ll survive the chaenge.” An the staetion birls.



Gunnie Margitschild can’t keep a secret

“Higgie’s gone completely crazy,” they say. Brenna is
sourbitterrudemiserable from her failure at the Council, and says, “She’s not
the only one. Erlend told me a strangerweird man in some sort of silver

robes asked him for the time, and spirited away, and Sigurd saw three folk like old-world cosmonauts, flags and everything, knocking on his airlock, and Auga says—" she doesn't draw breath "—they've seen ships in the fogfrost with drives that haven't been invented." "Yes. Crazy," says Gunnie, shaking their head and sighing, veryawfully sad, and Brenna says, "False consciousness." "What?"

"They can't properly accept what must be done, and so they're making up stories instead." "Yes, yes, they're crazy." Gunnie gives her arm a shockchancestrike, wanting to hold it, knowing she's ready to spilltip into her own kind of ragefuryfrenzy and nearly wantneeding to jumpspringvault in behind. Through the screen, the spin of Orcadia turns them to deep space, away from the golden glow of the gas giant. The corridor enters twilight. "It's like they wantneed our placedistancepartwhile to die," says Brenna, and Gunnie is worryirritated at that. "No, no," they say, too quiet. "They just aren't sure what will survive the change." And the station whirlrushdancespins.

Noor draems

Noor's quaters is oot by the Hofn,
a peedie cell by hidsel,
aneath the hulks sheu studies.

The night thir a ring o Light
aroon her sleepeen kist
wi no a body tae see it.
Sheu braethes; hid swaalls an birls;
i'the mids o the wheel sheu draems.

The wracks is spaekan. Thir
unfaaldan, a hingan glimro
o human wirds in waves
atwart the shiftan waas:
equaetions, errows. A mooth
appens wide i'the center
o the center. Hid spaeks; her haands
grip, ungrip, grip.

Wi morneen, sheu's breeksed, hinkid
i'the sheets like a bab or a corp,
sleepan yet whan sheu poors
watter on poodered maet,
an sleepan whan sheu gaithers
her notts an putters her skiff
oot tae the Wrack-Hofn.
Hid's notheen ither as silent.

But thir a calculaetion
sheu canno shak, a nummer
tae remak the mynd o the meisurs.
So noo sheu's back at the godssend,
hungered sam as this
wir the first day on site,
whan nummers wirno been wrowt

intae unmeanan an loss.



Noor dreams

Noor's quarters are out near the Havenharbour, a little cell on its own, beneath the hulks she studies. Tonight there's a ring of Light around her sleeping-chestcoffinbreast with no one there to see it. She breathes; it swellwaves and whirlrushdancespins; in the centre of the wheel she dreams.

The wrecks are speaking. They are unfolding, a hangleaning ghost-light of human words in waves across the changedodgemoving walls: equations, arrows. A mouth opens wide in the centre of the centre. It speaks; her hands clench, unclench, clench.

In the morning, she is exhausted, twisted in the sheets like a baby or a corpse, sleeping still when she pours water on powdered foodmeat, and sleeping when she gathers her notes and putters her skiff out to the Wreck-Havenharbour. It's nothing other than silent.

But there is a calculation she cannot shake, a number to remake the meaningmemorymindwill of the measurements. So now she's back at the salvagewrecktreasure, as hungry as if it were her first day on site, when numbers hadn't been worked into unmeaning and loss.

Darling catches wird fae haem

The bulletin's chaenged. Her faithers is chaired
her rodd a weys aroon the starns.
This wey. Whit wey deu thay ken? Whit nummers
is on the timer coontan doon?

Foo an birlan roon Wolf, mibbe
a body wis matched her face tae the caa,
her styman bletheran tae her face,
pitten her face an story taegither,

an cashed thaim in. That, or else
Autonomist ethics isno as geud
as thay claim. Whitivver wey: her faithers
ken tae ransel the inner Nord.

Noo the aafil grave quaistion:
tae bide in this coothie orbit, or git
enough o a pin tae flit the sistem,
like a rogue comet? Agalis

fer peedie staens tae win tae escaep
velocity, an sheu's some tired,
an faimly's gotten ferfil weyght.
An here is Astrid, a body at's mibbe

growan anither gravity.
Tae bide, an hopp sheu's chaenged enough
tae no be aesy clyped on tae
her faithers? An hopp whan thay come –

thay will, fer whit can gowd no deu –
thay'll no want noo whit wey sheu is,
an hopp wi time enough some wey
the Wheel'll no want tae lat her gang?



Darling catches word from home

The bulletin has changed. Her fathers have charted her route some distance around the stars. This way. Whathowwherewhy do they know? Which numbers are on the timer counting down?

Drunkmadfull and whirlrushdancespinning round Wolf, maybe someone had matched her face to the callherd, her staggeringblinddrunk talkchatrambling to her face, put her face and story together,

and cashed them in. That, or else Autonomist ethics aren't as good as they claim. No matter how: her fathers know to searchsnoopransack the inner North.

Now the veryawfully serious question: to waitstaylive in this friendlycomfortablepleasantunthreatening orbit, or to get enough speedfeet to leaveflyescape the system, like a rogue comet? Extraordinarily difficult

for little stones to reachtravelachieve escape velocity, and she's very tired, and family is veryfearfully heavy. And here there's Astrid, a personbody who is maybe

growing another gravity. To waitstaylive, and hope she's changed enough to not be easily ratted out to her fathers? And hope when they come

—

they will, because what can't money do — they won't wantneed whathowwherewhy she is, and hope with enough time somehow the Wheel won't want to let her go?

Inga taks her yole oot

Sheu canno ask her crew tae wirk ony hairder,
or thole tae quyt whan sheu's taen in notheen
fer tree lang day: so here sheu is, alaen
abeun the swaall ithoot a keek o Light.
Sheu chairts the whirls, the lins, the mains an the birts
o the yallo yotun's flowan sphere, an whar
thay'll hopp tae find a sign o Lights the morn,
an than the osc stairts skrekkan like a bairn.

Inga kens sheu canno tak in the Lights
alaen, but: days ithoot a keek
an noo a mense o Light, the mosst fer months,
jeust whan sheu canno tak it. Sheu dives in,
intae the upper tides, intae the ee,
intae the ayevidan stoor o a stoor planet,
skittran atween helm, daikles an lines,
thraan a flyre atwart her luntit face.

Hid wisno possieble. Sheu shoud been wrackid.
Wi whit sheu did, Orcadia shoud been murnan
But luck o the fell gods is wi her (an yass,
sheu pits up a prayer a second anent the wind),
so whan at laast sheu docks at Lightness Bay,
weel by the turnan o the Stannart Day,
sheu's taen tae haem tree day or more o Light,
an sets about unloddan hid by hersel.



Inga takes her boat out

She can't ask her crew to work any harder, or stand to quit when she's
brought in nothing for three long days: so here she is, alone above the

swellwave without a peep of Light. She charts the whirls, the restpauselulls, the main currents and the back currents of the yellow gas giant's flowing sphere, and where they'll hope to find a sign of Lights tomorrow, and then the oscilloscope starts yellscreeching like a child.

Inga knows she can't bring in the Lights by herself, but: days without a peep and now a vast amount of Light, the most for months, just when she can't take it. She dives in, into the upper seatimetides of gas, into the eye, into the everlasting stormstrifestrainspeeddust of a stormstrifestrainspeeddust planet, rushdarting about between helm, compasses and lines, twistthrowing a leergrimace across her sparklightflaming face.

It wasn't possible. She should have been wrecked. With what she did, Orcadia should have been mourning. But luck of the fiercecruelclever gods is with her (and yes, she says a prayer a second againstaboutbefore the wind), so when at last she docks at Lightness Hangar, well past the turning of the Standard Day, she's brought to home three days or more of Light, and starts to unload it by herself.

Astrid taks Darling tae a meun

Thay step intae a bruckit domm,
aa the poly taen fae the reuf,
an mosst o the dwangs an aa: liftid
back tae space tae big more bolas
an wheels whan the staetion wis growan.
Darling laens intae Astrid –
touchan trou seiven layers
o waakan claes – an leuks ap
at fower meuns. Or is it doon?
“I see why they gave up building here.
It’s gorgeous but I’m sick already.
It’s all too fast.” “Faaster as whit?
Fock is movvan faaster on Mars,
relietive tae the centre.” “But then
I couldn’t see! And I stayed on the ground.”

She haps her airms aroon Astrid’s waist
an kiek aff intae space. Thay flee
a fair piece. Thir tedders stretch.
Darling golders. Astrid, quiet,
flees thaim doon. “Dinno,” sheu says.
“Fock dee that wey.” “But we—” “Jeust ken,
fock dee. Jeust ken. Noo waatch.” Orcadia
turns intae view, an the yotun,
an five, an sax more meuns. The tirlan
mathematics is a dose more
as Darling can compriehend, fer aa
sheu wis fower year sailan curves
closser tae the galactic centre.
Sheu kens, noo, hoo faast is faast,
an still, an hoo the staetion, spinnan,
pinned sicweys atween planet an starn,
the tree o thaim a godless grand
an trig triangle, faast an still,

is noo an aye the only rest.



Astrid takes Darling to a moon

They step into a brokenrubbishruined dome, all the plasticpolymer taken from the roof and most of the struttoilstrains as well: lifted back to space to construct more bolas and wheels when the station was growing. Darling leans into Astrid – touching through seven layers of spacewalk clothes – and looks up at four moons. Or is it down? “I see why they gave up building here. It’s gorgeous but I’m sick already. It’s all too fast.” “Faster than what? People move faster on Mars, relative to the centre.” “But then I couldn’t see! And I stayed on the ground.”

She wrapcoverbundles her arms round Astrid’s waist and kicks off into space. They fly a good placedistancepartwhile. Their tethers stretch. Darling yelllaughroars. Astrid, quiet, flies them down. “Don’t,” she says. “People die that way.” “But we—” “Just know, people die. Just know. Now watch.” Orcadia turns into view, and the gas giant, and five, and six more moons. The turntwistwhirlspinning mathematics is far more than Darling can comprehend, for all she was four years sailing curves closer to the centre of the galaxy. She knows, then, how fastfixed is fastfixed, and stillfixedsecretsilent, and how the station, spinning, pinned a specific distance between planet and star, all three making a verygodless greatbig and neatbriskcomplete triangle, fastfixed and stillfixedsecretsilent, is now and always the only rest.

Tree

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Astrid shaas Darling her wark

“It’s beautiful!” says Darling. “Bonnie,” sheu says,
cooriean in, giean a smuthick, no seean
the artist’s teum leuk. “The yellows and greens,
the way you’ve caught the planetary winds.

How small the station seems in the corner. So much
feeling.” Astrid canno spaek. Sheu spaeks:
“A’m no feelan hid.” Darling laaghs.
“You might not know it but I think you are,

somewhere. Honestly, this is fantastic.” The artist
wheenks an graabs her claes, waantan layers
atween her spacer skin an Darling’s scunneran
enthusiasm. “Thoo disno unnerstaan.”

Darling sees the ranyie noo, stairts
tae compriehend the scael o hid, her piece
in hid, the fear o hid. “Tell me?” But Astrid’s
buskid an oot the doar, laevan her slaet.



Astrid showpasses Darling her work

“It’s beautiful!” says Darling. “Finepretty,” she says,
snugglenestlehuddling close, giving Astrid a kisscaresscuddle, missing
Astrid’s emptyhungry look. “The yellows and greens, the way you’ve
caught the planetary winds.

How small the station seems in the corner. So much feeling.” Astrid
can’t speak. She speaks: “I don’t feel it.” Darling laughs. “You might not
know it but I think you are,

somewhere. Honestly, this is fantastic.” The artist shrugtwitchflounces
off and grabs her clothes, wantneeding layers between her spacer skin and

Darling's sick spoiling enthusiasm. "You don't understand."

Darling sees the writhing pain now, starts to comprehend the scale of it, her placed distance part while in it, the fear of it. "Tell me?" But Astrid's dress prepared and has left, leaving her slate.

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Inga is waantan pey

Whan Inga comes oot tae Noor
tae pit a fingerprent
tae a slaet tae confirm the salvage –
the credits tae be turst
intae the next shaef
fer the next Autonomist ferry
tae tak tae a bankeen staetion,
an fae thir furdur oot
the gret galactic airm
til hid wins tae a piece whar data
can traivel better an faaster
by lang waves o light
as by a shaef on a ship,
an twatree month hid'll be
afore a record comes back
that on a muckle net

o sairvers on some planet,
a piece sheu'll nivver gang,
the nummers at track her credits
is ap, an aence this process
teuk years, an inner staetions
didno need credits,
but the less Orcadia maks
the more hid's gotten nummers –
the arkaeolojist's sheuched
in a bing o slaets an mummlan
uncan formulae,
flippan fae slaet tae slaet.
“Thir a livveen in this?”
speirs Inga. Noor turns.
Her een is a lightyear away.
“In what?” sheu says. An Inga

waffs ower the blinkan gear,
 an, dootsome, oot the screen.
Noor cheeters. “In studying
 impenetrable galactic mysteries
without commercial use?”
 “Ya,” says Inga, shruggan.
Noor, distracted, picks
 a slaet fer the docket.
“For now, but whims of funding
 might well summon me home
at any moment.” Sheu leuks
 til a wrack. “Even now.”
Hid’s bobban on hids tedder.
 The spaekers bide silent.
The wrack laeves the screen.
 “Right enogh,” says Inga.

“Me coseen is wi a college
 roon Alpha Centauri, wirkan
wi archives o 21st century
 intertextual narrative,
an sheu says somtheen like that.
 Right enogh. An if
more o thee fock cam in
 I doot thay’ll be needan
fock at kens botts?”
 Noor sees the want
i’the quaistion. Hid’s the sam
 as the want sheu’s gotten whan fleean
roon wracks, the want sheu’s gramsan
 again: no jeust tae bide,
tae hae enogh maet tae bide,
 but tae bide wi uiss.

Sheu shaas the salvage docket
 tae Inga. “Here,” sheu says,
an “If . . .” The yolewife waits.

“If what I think I’ve found . . .”
Noor shaks her heid an fires
a queek peedie freesk.
“I’ll ask,” sheu says. The wracks
pass by. “I’ll certainly ask.”



Inga is wantingwithout pay

When Inga comes out to Noor to put a fingerprint to a slate to confirm the salvage – the credits to be trussbundlegrappled into the next sheafslice for the next Autonomist ferry to take to a banking station, and from there farther out the great galactic arm, until it reachtravelachieves the placedistancepartwhile where data can travel better and faster by long waves of light than by a sheafslice on a ship, and it will be a few months before any record comes back that, on a greatbig net

of servers on a random planet, a placedistancepartwhile she’ll never go, the numbers that track her credits are up, and this process once took years, and inner stations didn’t need credits, but the less Orcadia makes the more they have numbers – the archaeologist’s burytrenchguttered in a heapbin of slates and mumbling strangerweird formulae, flipping from slate to slate. “Is there a living in this?” asks Inga. Noor turns. Her eyes are a lightyear away. “In what?” she says. And Inga

signalgesturhintwaves at the flashingcursed equipment, and, uncertain, through the screen. Noor chucklegiggles. “In studying impenetrable galactic mysteries without commercial use?” “Yes,” says Inga, shrugging. Noor, distracted, tapchaptakes a slate for the docket. “For now, though whims of funding might well summon me home at any moment.” She looks over at a wreck. “Even now.” It’s rockdanceswaying on its tether. The speakers waitstaylive silent. The wreck leaves the screen. “I see,” says Inga.

“My cousin works at a college orbiting Alpha Centauri, working on archives of 21st century intertextual narrative, and she says something like that. OK then. And if more of your people travel here, I expect they will need people who know boats?” Noor sees the wantneed in the question, because it’s the same wantneed she has had when flying around wrecks, the

wantneed she's snatchgrabbing again: not just to waitstaylive, to have enough foodmeat to waitstaylive, but to waitstaylive with use.

She showpasses the salvage docket to Inga. "Here," she says, and "If . . ." The boat worker waits. "If what I think I've found . . ." Noor shakes her head and chuckthrowfires a quick little false smile. "I'll ask," she says. The wrecks pass by. "I will certainly ask."

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Darling peys Olaf fer a hurl

“I’m interested,” sheu says, “in how you work.”
Olaf is dozent, hingan atween blaetness,
twartieness an his awn restless virr
fer the botts an the Lights. He kinno waants tae tell
ivrytheen tae sombody, but disno
ken whit like a body sheu is, but
is fyarmt, but disno waant tae disappoynt,
but is prood, but is feart, so says,
“Oh yaas,” lukkan oot, an notheen more.
The yole sails oot the dock wi ferfil quiet.

Darling’s peyed him, tho, an wisno borned
tae walth or comed atwart the galaxy
ithoot lairnan somtheen aboot tisan
a faevor: sheu leuks fer less o the suspiecion
an more o the desire. Sheu speirs him slaa
an huily, piece an piece, laevan space
tae leuk at space, draas oot a bit o wittans,
here an thir, on hoo tae steer an hoo
tae leuk an whit tae waatch an whar tae ken
the gret yotun’s dose o daenjers bide.

So whan Olaf says “Whit i’ the naem . . .”
an draps the drive o the yole tae a tentie putter,
sheu disno speir right away an disno mak
a panshite, but leuks oot whar he leuks an waits.
Abeun the yotun afore them the Lights is biggan
a face. Thir isno anither wird. I’ the rouk
thir twatree thoosan poynts o Light biggan
a face the size o a meun: aald, aald,
lang beard, ae ee appen, ae ee puckered,
ae mooth appen, appen an rashan forrit.

The god swallaes the yole. Aa’s dairk: nae light,

nae Lights. A notion o speed, o weyght, an than—
thay spret intae the starns, oot the pug
o the planet. Olaf's screens bleusk, blue,
sprout, staedy. He haals thaim intae orbit
ahint Orcadia. Darling's grip relaxes:
sheu's cloort her saet's shinan aald black poly,
ten white lines doon aither side. Sheu hoasts.
“That doesn't usually happen?” sheu says, ithoot
a moot o a smile, an Olaf replies, “Na.”



Darling pays Olaf for a tripspeedride

“I'm interested,” she says, “in how you work.” Olaf is stymiestupefied, hangleaning between shynessdiffidence, perverse grumpiness and his own restless vigourwhirr for the boats and the Lights. He sort of wantneeds to tell everything to someone, but doesn't know what sort of someone she is, but is flattercajoled, but doesn't want to disappoint, but is proud, but is afraid, so says, “Mhm,” looking out, and nothing more. The boat sails out of the dock, veryfearful quiet.

Darling has paid him, though, and wasn't born to wealth or come across the galaxy without learning something about coaxcajoling a favour: she looks for less of the suspicion and more of the desire. She questions him laxslow and carefulslowgentle, bit by bit, leaving space to look at space, draws out a little wisdomknowledgenews, here and there, on how to steer and how to look and what to watch and where to know the great gas giant's many dangers waitstaylive.

So when Olaf says, “What in the name . . .” and drops the drive of the boat to a carefulwatchful putter, she doesn't ask right away and doesn't cause a panicfussflurry, but looks out where he looks and waits. Above the gas giant before them the Lights are building a face. There's no other word. In the fogfrost there are several thousand points of Light building a face the size of a moon: old, old, long beard, one eye open, one eye puckered, one mouth open, open and rushraining forward.

The god swallowdrinks the boat. All is dark: no light, no Lights. The ideaexperimentinvention of speed, of weight, and then— they startstripburstjump into the stars, out of the belly of the planet. Olaf’s screens flash, blue, sparkspit, steady. He hauls them into orbit behind Orcadia. Darling’s grip relaxes: she’s clawscratched her seat’s shining old black plasticpolymer: ten white lines down either side. She coughharrumphclears. “That doesn’t usually happen?” she says, without a hintwhisper of a smile, and Olaf says, “Nope.”

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Astrid speirs her faither fer advice

Thay spaek aboot his years o relativistic speed, haalan bits o Wheels an Light atween Mars an the inner staetions: the distance, the thrill, the kinno fock on langship freighters, the needle o haem. Twinty-fower year: twa return trips, than a stop. A freighter's a puckle o fock an a demption o noyse, but no a histy, an that wey isno that far fae paece.

Thay spaek aboot Orcadia's histy, the thraan mixer-maxter o fock at biggid the staetion, the trachle tae cheuss anither wey o cheussan, the hunder o year o bean a piece at fock fae grander pieces cam fer somepiece ither, the fock at steyed, the fock at flit. The chaenges. Whit isno chaenged. Whit shoudno. Whit might. Whit maan. Whit will. The speed at's noo catcht up wi thaim.

Thay spaek aboot Mars. The trang o the surface. Aboot the weyght o a planet. Aboot hoo a starn leuks fae ither starns. Aboot whit thir seen an Inga isno. Aboot whit Inga kens fae nivver laevan an whit fae laevan thay'll nivver ken. Thay dinno spaek aboot Darling ava, an thay dinno spaek aboot art, an thay dinno spaek aboot whither Astrid's bidan haem or no. But thay deu.



Astrid asks her father for advice

They speak about his years of relativistic speed, hauling pieces of Wheels and Light between Mars and the inner stations: the distance, the

thrill, the types of people on longship freighters, the needle of home. Twenty-four years, two return trips, then a stop. A freighter's a few people and an inundation of noise, but not a history, and being like that is not very far from peace.

They speak about Orcadia's history, the tossedawkward mix of people that built the station, the drudgemuddletrudge to choose a different way of choosing, the hundreds of years of being a placedistancepartwhile that people from greatbigger placedistancepartwhiles went to go somewhere else, the people that stayed, the people that leaveflyescaped. The changes. What hasn't changed. What shouldn't. What might. What must. What will. The speed that's now caught up with them.

They speak about Mars. The crowdbustlecloseness of the surface. About the weight of a planet. About how a star looks from other stars. About what they've seen and Inga hasn't. About what Inga knows from never leaving and what from leaving they'll never know. They don't speak about Darling at all, and they don't speak about art, and they don't speak about Astrid waitstayliving home or not. But they do.

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Darling gies Eynar the tael

“And then the face just spat us out!”
Sheu’s smilan wide at the tig o daeth.
“Olaf steered us home safe,
but wouldn’t say another word,

as if the Light had taken his tongue.”
Eynar haads her glentan een.
“Fine tael,” he says, an notheen more.
“Oh, come on!” Sheu’s aafil fasht.

“It’s more than a tale. And I know we’re not
the only ones. I heard—” “Whit
did thoo hear?” Darling spys the danger
this time. “Oh,” sheu says, “Just

that other folk had seen strange things.
That folk are talking.” “Aye weel,” he says,
“fock spaek a lot o guff.” An he gangs
tae the back reum, whar surely thir wark.

Darling leuks aboot her. Thir
a puckle o fock i’the Hoose. “It’s not
just me,” sheu says tae naebody. “I know
you’ve seen them too.” Thir no a reply.



Darling tells Eynar the story

“And then the face just spat us out!” She’s smiling wide at the
taptwitchtease of death. “Olaf steered us home safe, but wouldn’t say
another word,

like the Light had taken his tongue.” Eynar holds her glinting eyes. “Good story,” he says, and nothing more. “Oh, come on!” She’s very awfully fussvexworried.

“It’s more than a story. And I know we’re not the only ones. I heard—” “What did you hear?” Darling sees spots the danger this time. “Oh,” she says, “Just

that other people had seen strange things. That folk are talking.” “Yes, well,” he says, “people say a lot of stinkpuffsnortnonsense.” And he heads to the back room, where there’s surely work.

Darling looks around. There are a few people in the House. “It’s not just me,” she says to no one. “I know you’ve seen them too.” There’s no reply.

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The Dance

Aence, the fock at first cam here
kent a planet's elliptiecal orbit,
seasons an a almanac,
Noo thir cruises an year-roond wark.

But thay keepid the aalwarld time,
an cruises is set tae Stannart Days,
whitiver thir staetion's spin. Thir dances,
preens tae string the yearless year.

So Brenna and Higgie is stringan a line
atwart the Haa wi light-ap letters,
in a tong thay deu an dinno spaek,
spellan oot "Harvest Home".

Ither fock redd an sweep the floar.
Eynar is biggan a bar i'the corner.
On stage, the band is checkan tuins
wi haand-held sinths an tings tae bang,

an a hollow body o wid an wire
at's played fer twatree hunder o year,
ower wi fock on a aerly ship.
The soond thay mak taegither is wyld.

~

Afore the dance, thir bairns unnaemed.
Astrid explaens the service tae Darling:
at seiven or eyght Stannart Year,
whan raedy an chossen, thay tak a naem –

or, in Orcadia's wirds, gie –
a naem an a sel tae the staetion's care.

Thir tree the night, an parents an elders,
an ither fock at choss tae waatch,

like Darling, stannan at the back.
This year hid's Øyvind's taen the role
o Naemer. He haads a gless o bleud.
(Hid's sinthesised, no oot o shaem,

but blood o a lamb is ower rare
an ower dear this lang weys in.)
Erlendsbairn hitches thir sark,
steps apae the aald wid altar

an harks in Øyvind's lug. The Naemer
draas a ring on the bairn's broo,
haads skinnymalinky airms, an cries,
“Haelga!” Sheu steps doon. An “Haelga!”

cries the crood, hintan the naem.
Darling's voyce is brakkan noo.
Sheu speirs o Astrid – a seicont bairn
steps ap – “But what if she's got it wrong?”

Astrid's a bittie bombazed. “Thir aye
anither year,” sheu says, grabbid.
Darling's een is wheels. “How often
are you allowed to take a name?”

Astrid: “Wheesht!” The naem comes: “Kit!”
“Thir nae a rule,” sheu mummmles, thight.
Darling thinks fer a peedie blink.
“Could I give a name?” sheu speirs, saft.

Astrid disno reply, an waatches
the laast o the bairns spaek tae the Naemer:
Erikasbairn, sibleen o Brenna.
Øyvind stairts whan he hears the naem.

A still. “Astrid!” he cries, an Astrid
hears the Haa cry oot her naem,
kennan hid isno fer her, but thinkan
some wey yet hid shuirly is.

~

The dance begins. The band gits gaan,
neesteran at first like an injine sat
fer a year, but seun enogh runnan
fine. Thir leader caas the dance:

a tree-step first, tae rax oot limbs
an find the yivver feet thir baet
an dancers thir pairtners; next a set
tae frapp thaim ap, an than a waaltz.

Darling waants tae be the first
tae the floar. But Astrid haads her back,
mibbe oot o waantan tae see
the aalder folk’s exemple first,

mibbe more oot o fear, or jeust
a curn o shaem. But wi the waaltz
sheu finds hersel an lifts her Darling
ontae the floar. Thir plenty wi thaim.

~

Eynar’s waatchan fae ahint his bottles
fer Noor tae come. He disno show hid.
He disno ken hoo he’s bithert, or mibbe
he deus: he’s mibbe no gaan tae see

anither dance, an waants tae dance
wi a new body at’ll mak a meaneen.
He smiles at Olaf wi his bairn,
liftan thaim an birlan roond,

an at the new-naemed youngsters dansan
aafil solemn, tentie noo
as aalder fock, but ithoot age's
grace an sprets o scarsome speed.

An at the pairtners, futurs telt
i'the wey o thir grip: ower closs
or ower lowse or glydan by
wi the aese o binary starns. (Ya, but

thir aye anither body coman
on anither curve tae mak
a fankelt problem, an best kens
whit wey the calculaetions come.)

~

Noor isno coman. Sheu's at the Hofn,
alaen, no myndan, mummlan nummers,
testan oot equaetions, rypan
the mosst obscure o airticles

i'the laest reputable o jurnals
fer ivry uncan formula
tae shape aroon the shape o the wracks.
Ayont her een the Lights is gaitheran;

ahint her, paitrens sheu canno see.
Sheu's pittan her haands tae the black waas:
no clift tae rive at or kneb tae press,
but sheu's pressan, room by room.

Pick that, feel this, kick yin, caam doon.
Nivver kens sheu hoo desire is comed,
or if hid'll faa intae notheen again.
Sheu bides wi the draem an no wi time.

~

Thir dance is oot the ither side
o night, the cruises giean the wynds
a daiker reid fer gangan haem.
But plenty's left fer dansan yet.

Gunnie becks tae Higgle wi aa
the coortsey o young tae aald.
Thay whip her away. Brenna's taen
her sleepin sister oot fer a waaltz.

Inga an Øyvind is comed in late
tae hae the virr fer the best o the dance:
fock drucken an lipperan wi haanless joy.
Thir steps an skips is naet an queek,

birlan each ither wi weel-kent airms.
Olaf an Erlend tummle afore thaim:
thay loup the footers no brakkan thir baet.
Øyvind wis taen ower lang tae win haem

fae ooter space, an Inga wis born
an wun ages wi him in his final run,
but thay aye coud dance. Thay hurl
doon the Haa's muckle set.

~

But Darling an Astrid isno thir.
Thir comed oot the back o the Haa tae a bell
tae braethe an waatch anither stoor,
the Lights' antics in time wi the meusic.

Anunder the glamour Darling speirs
again: "Could I take a name?" An Astrid
turns. "We gie. But thoo – tae wha?
Wha kens thee enogh tae gie hid back?

Thoo canno jeust tak whit thoo waants." "What I need,"

says Darling, wi peedie voyce, but this
is warse. “Yin’s whit I sayed,” spits Astrid,
een reflectan the skyran Lights.

Darling isno deualess. Wi feck,
sheu pelters Astrid. Sheu naems the dreids
at Astrid thinks is darnt but lie
ower closs tae the skin. Sheu fires:

“Just because you lost your home,
doesn’t mean the rest of us
can’t look for ours,” an “Some of us never
had a piece.” The wird is cruel.

“You can’t understand what it’s like, to free
yourself from all this expectation,
to have to remake yourself.” Is Darling
listened tae notheen o Astrid’s haem?

Or ower much? Sheu isno telt
enough o her life tae fer this tae laand
ither as cruel, her waants fankled
i’ the voyce o pouer. So Astrid plays

the dour local, sayan notheen,
turnan away, an noo hid’s Darling
at’s peltran doon the set’s centre,
the dancers aesy sweengan by.

~

Thir jeust the ae dance noo: a waaltz.
The dancers is breeksed. A few can leuk
in thir pairtners’ een, but mosst is jeust
heids on shudders an shucklan feet.

Thir ither fock in uncan claes,
an Light is gaitheran roon the girders.

Aabody's on the floar, no seean,
or mibbe thir seean an irno fasht.

A airy pair in oo waaltz roon
a see-trou pair in poly, a treesome
in cotton gang trou a fowersome in siller.
Roon an trou, ganfer or maet

or light or Light: dancers dansan.
Is hid meusic? Whit body movs
whit body's body? Roon an trou,
maan feet write answers on the floar?

~

The fock o the staetion gang oot the doar.
Eynar an Margit is rotad on cleanan.
Thay sweep an swabble an dight oot the Haa.
An eftir, Eynar taks a sit.

"Did thoo see yin?" Sheu sits hersel.
"Did thoo no?" An Eynar nods.
"Thinks thoo will we see hid again?" he speirs,
like a bairn. "A'll no," sheu says. "We might."



The Dance

Once the people who first came here knew a planet's elliptical orbit,
seasons and an almanac. Now they have sun-lamps and year-round work.

But they kept the old world's time, and sun-lamps are set to Standard
Days, whatever their station's spin. There are dances, pins along which to
string the yearless year.

So Brenna and Higgie are stringing a line across the Hall with light-up
letters, in a tongue they do and don't speak, spelling out "Harvest Home".

Other people clear and sweep the floor. Eynar is building a bar in the corner. On stage, the band is checking tunes with hand-held synths and things to bang,

and a hollow body of wood and wire that's played for a few hundred years, come here with people on a ship early on. The sound they make together is wild.

~

Before the dance, there's the unnamed children. Astrid explains the service to Darling: at seven or eight Standard Years, when they're ready and have chosen, they take a name –

or, in Orcadia's words, give – a name and a self to the station's care. There are three tonight, along with their parents and elders, and people that chose to watch,

like Darling, standing at the back. This year Øyvind has taken the role of Namer. He holds a glass of blood. (It's synthesised, not because of shame

but because the blood of a lamb is too rare and too expensive such a long distance into the galaxy.) Erlendsbairn lifts up the hem of their shirt, steps up to the old wood altar,

and whisperwishes in Øyvind's ear. The Namer draws a ring on the child's forehead, holds very skinny arms, and callnameproclaims, "Haelga!" She steps down. And "Haelga!"

callnameproclaims the crowd, gathergleansnatching her in. Darling's voice is breaking now. She asks Astrid – the second child steps up – "But what if she's got it wrong?"

Astrid's a little bewilderstupified. "There's always another year," she says, vexed. Darling's eyes are wheels. "How often are you allowed to take a name?"

Astrid: "Shush!" The name comes: "Kit!" "There's no rule," she mumbles, tight-lipped. Darling thinks for a little blankblink. "Could I give a name?" she asks, softgentlestupid.

Astrid doesn't reply, and watches the last child speak to the Namer: Erikasbairn, sibling of Brenna. Øyvind starts when he hears the name.

A pauselullsecretssilence. "Astrid!" he callnameproclaims, and Astrid hears the Hall callnameproclaim her name, knowing that it's not for her, but

thinking that somehow it surely is.

~

The dance begins. The band gets going, snortcreaksqueaking at first like an engine left to sit for a year, but soon enough running well. Their leader calls out the names and steps of the dances:

a three-step first, to stretchreachexpand out limbs and for eagersshakeanxious feet to find their beat, and for dancers to find their partners; then a set-dance, tae mixtangle them up, and then a waltz.

Darling wants to be the first to the floor. But Astrid holds her back, maybe out of wantneeding to see the old people's example first,

maybe more out of fear, or just a motegrain of shame. But with the waltz she finds herself and lifts Darling up to the floor. There are plenty of people with them.

~

Eynar's watching from behind his bottles for Noor to come. He doesn't show it. He doesn't know why he's worried about it, or maybe he does: maybe he's not going to see

another dance, and wants to dance with a new bodyperson who'll make a meaning. He grins at Olaf with his child, lifting them and whirlrushdancespinning round,

and at the new-named youngsters dancing veryawfully solemn, carefulwatchful now as the old people, but without age's grace and startstripburstjumps of terrifying speed.

And at the partners, futures toldwarned in how they hold each other: too close or too loose or gliding by with the ease of binary stars. (Yes, but

there's always another bodyperson coming on another curve to make a puzzletangled problem, and gods know whathowwherewhy the calculation will come out.)

~

Noor isn't coming. She's at the Havenharbour, alone, not rememberknowreflectwilling, mumbling numbers, testing equations, searchplundercleardigging the most obscure articles

in the least reputable journals for every strangerweird formula to shape around the shape of the wrecks. Out of her eyeline the Lights are gathering; behind her, patterns she can't see. She's putting her hands on the black walls: without a crackchink to wrenchripbreak at or knobbeakpointbutton to press, but she's pressing, room by room.

Tapchaptake that, feel this, kick that, calm down. She doesn't know why desire has come, or if it'll fall into nothing again. She waitstaylives with the dream and not with time.

~

Their dance has come out the other side of night, the sun-lamps giving the corridors a darker red for going home. But there's plenty of time left for dancing.

Gunnie curtseybows to Higgle with all the courtesy of young to old. They gustdarttwistattack her off. Brenna's taken her sleeping sister out for a waltz.

Inga and Øyvind came late to have enough vigourwhirr for the best of the dance: people drunk and fullspilloverflowing with clumsyuseless joy. Their steps and skips are neat and quick,

whirlrushdancespinning each other with familiar arms. Olaf and Erlend tumble in front of them: they jumpspringvault the clumsy fools without breaking their beat. Øyvind had taken too long to reach home,

from outer space, and Inga was born and grew up to his age during his final run, but they always could dance. They speedthrowrolldrive down the Hall's greatbig set.

~

But Darling and Astrid aren't there. They've come out to the back of the Hall to a bubblebell to breathe and watch another stormstrifestrainspeeddust, the Lights' antics in time with the music.

Under the magicdelight Darling asks again, "Could I take a name?" And Astrid turns. "We give. But you – to who? Who knows you enough to give it back?"

You can't just take what you wantneed." "What I need," says Darling, with a little voice, but this is worse. "That's what I said," spits Astrid, eyes reflecting the gaudyshining Lights.

Darling's not feebleuseless. With powerworthattention, she pelthammerruns Astrid. She names the dreads that Astrid thinks are hiddenestled but which lie too close to the skin. She chuckthrowfires:

"Just because you lost your home, doesn't mean none of the rest of us can't look for ours," and "Some of us never had a placedistancepartwhile." The word is cruel.

"You can't understand what it's like, to free yourself from all this expectation, to have to remake yourself." Has Darling listened to nothing of Astrid's home?

Or too much? She hasn't said enough about her life for any of this to land any other way than cruel, her wantneeds tanglepuzzled with the voice of power. So Astrid plays

the dour local, saying nothing, turning away, and now it's Darling that's pelthammerrunning down the centre of the set, the dancers easily swinging to let her by.

~

There's only one dance left now: a waltz. The dancers are exhaustedbroken. A few are able to look into their partners' eyes, but most are only heads on shoulders and shufflelimping feet.

There are other people in strangerweird clothes, and Light is gathering round the girders. Everybody's on the floor, not seeing, or maybe they're seeing and don't care.

An airy pair in wool waltz round a transparent pair in plasticpolymer, a threesome in cotton go through a foursome in silver. Round and through, ghostomen or foodmeat

or light or Light: dancers dancing. Is there music? What personbody moves what personbody's personbody? Round and through, must feet write answers on the floor?

~

The people of the station leave. It's Eynar and Margit's turn to clean. They sweep and swillmop and cleanwipe out the Hall. And after, Eynar sits down.

"Did you see that?" She sits down. "Didn't you?" And Eynar nods. "Do you think we'll see it again?" he asks, like a child. "I won't," she says. "We

might.”

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Gunnie an Brenna imajin futures

Thir cooried in Gunnie's reum
the eftirneun eftir the dance:
thir no left yet. A day

fer raxan, rowan an restan
the both o thir bodies. Her haand
in thir hair, thir heid on her chest,

Gunnie thinks on thir waants.
A piece wi thir mither, yass,
but a yole o thir awn wad be better.

Inga's ower wabbit:
thir livveens tae be gotten,
wi a puckle o chaenges.

Brenna can hiv her races
tae Federal Tings, as lang's
sheu taks back better daels;

fer aa her haivers sheu kens
gowd an refuses tae quyt.
Yaas, thir aye a wey.

Fer her pairt, Brenna is slippan
fae ae draem tae the tither,
fae crisis tae revolution.

In waarm wakkan, sheu
thinks on organisan
an reorganisan,

coories closser, fer in
this theoretiecal bed
thir futures tae be maed.



Gunnie and Brenna imagine futures

They're snugglenestlehuddled in Gunnie's room the afternoon after the dance: they haven't left yet. A day

for stretchreachexpanding, rolling and resting both of their bodies. Her hand in their hair, their head on her chest,

Gunnie thinks about what they wantneed. A placedistancepartwhile with their mother, yes, but a boat of their own would be better.

Inga's too tiredbroken: there are livings to be had, with a few changes.

Brenna can have her trips to the Federal Councils, as long as she brings back better deals;

for all her noisy nonsense she knows about money and refuses to quit. Yes, there's always a way.

For her part, Brenna is slipping from one dream to the next, from crisis to revolution.

In warm waking, she thinks about organising and reorganising,

snugglenestlehuddles closer, because in this theoretical bed there are futures to be made.

Astrid, oot

A peedie beeteen's needed
on a peedie module oot
the end o Aikeray:

a Papa, monietoran
micro-waith, the driv
o scows at murder-speeds

passan ivry oor.
Ithoot defense, the staetion
wad be wrackid in seconds.

Astrid needed oot
her heid, so teuk a wark
fae the Ting's duty-boards.

The repair wis coman at.
Thay uissed this kinno wark
tae lairn bairns the staetion.

The wrench kens her haand.
Her haand kens the turn.
Aroon her is a murgis

o starns an instruments,
but Astrid keeps her een
on the haand, the wrench, the wark.

Wi ivry rive her hairt
is ruggid furder appen.
Ony tear wad bide

at the buddom o her mask
til sheu wis back inbye,
an so sheu disno greet.

Beeteen deun sheu lies,
mask tae the metal,
braethan wi the staetion.



Astrid, out

A little repairpaintimprovement is needed on a small module attached to the far end of Aikeray:

a Papa, monitoring micro-debris, the rainshower of fragmentruins travelling at murder-speeds

passing every hour. Without defence, the station would be wrecked in seconds.

Astrid needed to get out of her head, so took a job from the Council's duty-boards.

The repair was progressing. They used this sort of work to teach children about the station.

The wrench knows her hand. Her hand knows the turn. Around her is a riotcrowdmud

of stars and instruments, but Astrid keeps her eyes on the hand, the wrench, the work.

With every wrenchripbreak her heart is teargnawknotted further open. Any tear would waitstaylive

at the bottom of her mask until she was back inside, and so she doesn't weep.

Repairpaintimprovement done she lies, mask to the metal, breathing with the station.

Darling meets Margit Lighter fer bisness

Sheu isno spokken tae Astrid
fae the dance twa day by,
but sheu's maed ap her mynd.
Sheu wis maed ap her mynd i'the mids
o the cangle, the meenit sheu ran,
wi ivry ee on her back.
Yestreen sheu wis gotten a meeteen
wi Margit tae mak the proposal;

the day thay'll shak haands.
Sheu's sat at the waa o the bay,
waatchan twatree yoles
laanchan fer the yotun,
whan Margit waffs a haand
afore her. "Whar wir thoo!"
"Out there," says Darling, poyntan
trou the containment dyke.

"Thir time fer that," says Margit.
Sheu's blide. Darling didno
think that sheu'd be blide.
Sheu wis jubish, than ootward, noo blide.
Whan Darling's Martian naem
is pitten tae the chit,
sheu's happier yet. "Dinno fash,"
says the ex-yolewife.

"A'll no tell a sowel.
Credits peys fer quiet.
Kens thoo whit thoo're deuan?"
"No yet. I'll learn." "Hid's chancy."
"I've seen. I'd like to see more."
"Thoo kens the Lights is chaengan."
Darling's surprised tae hear

a body admit hid. Tae her.

“I ken. And maybe that’s what
I want to see. I’ll learn.”

“Thoo will.” Margit is siccar.

“What will you do?” An Margit’s
dairk een lowe.

Sheu’s tree times Darling’s age
but noo seems younger.

“Bairn,” sheu says, “whit’ll I no?”



Darling meets Margit the Lighter for business

She hasn’t spoken to Astrid since the dance two days ago, but she’s made up her mind. She had made up her mind in the middle of the argumentwrangling, the moment she ran, with every eye on her back. Yesterday she had a meeting with Margit to make the proposal;

today they’ll shake hands. She’s sitting against the wall of the hangar, watching a few boats launching for the gas giant, when Margit signalgesturehintwaves a hand in front of her. “Where were you!” “Out there,” says Darling, pointing through the containment wallfieldbarrier.

“There’s time for that,” says Margit. She’s happyfondpleased and Darling didn’t think she’d be happyfondpleased. She was suspiciousanxiousdoubtful, then outwardreserveddistant, now happyfondpleased. When Darling’s Martian name is put to the chit, she’s even more happy. “Don’t fussvexworry,” says the ex-boat worker.

“I won’t tell a soul. Credits pay for quiet. Do you know what you’re doing?” “Not yet. I’ll learn.” “It’s riskyunlucky.” “I’ve seen. I’d like to see more.” “You know the Lights are changing.” Darling’s surprised to hear someone admit it. To her.

“I know. And maybe that’s what I want to see. I’ll learn.” “You will.” Margit is stableseveresteadfast. “What will you do?” And Margit’s dark eyes flameglowflickerflare. She’s three times Darling’s age, but now seems younger. “Child,” she says, “what won’t I do?”

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Eynar pits oot a advert

But Eynar writan his wirds leuks grim.
“Bar”, hid raeds. “Going Concern.”
He checks his skeulbeuk. “Get Away
From It All. Opportunity
For Fantastic Growth.” He adds
exclamaetion mairks, than hits
delete. He adds a dose o hashtags
an thinks on wha might sairch thaim oot.

The text’s gaan oot tae the center o tings:
Alpha Centauri, than Sol, fer Mars.
An than fae thir back intae the haaf.
Muckle orbital fock first,
than muckle grunders wi fantasies
o fock like him. Than peedier pieces,
peedier fock at canno thole
thir haem an canno thole a dreef.

Can Eynar thole a dreef? Weel,
he’s time. Months, likely, aye,
afore thir ony replies. Can aye
chaenge his mynd. He leuks aboot
his Hoose, hids chairs an taebles, waas
hung wi viddies, print-oots, bruck.
He pits a simpler message tae Noor:
“Coman oot. Waant onytheen?”



Eynar sends out an advert

But Eynar writing his words looks grimgrey. “Bar”, it reads. “Going Concern.” He checks his textbook. “Get Away From It All. Opportunity For

Fantastic Growth.” He adds exclamation marks, then hits delete. He adds a lot of hashtags and thinks about who might search for them.

The text is heading out to the centre of things: Alpha Centauri, then Sol, for Mars. And then from there back into deep space. Biggreat orbital people first, then biggreat planet-dwellers with fantasies about people like him. Then littler placedistancepartwhiles, littler people who can’t stand their home and can’t stand a crowdherd.

Can Eynar stand a crowdherd? Well, he has time. Months, likely, yes, before there are any replies. Can always change his mind. He looks around his House, its chairs and tables, walls hung with video screens, print-outs, rubbishscrap. He sends a simpler message to Noor: “Coming out. Do you wantneed anything?”

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Stoor

The yotun is still whan thay laanch, or seems
still: hids swaalls o gas more gless
as birlan wind. But fae this distance
wind is apaece an fire is caald.

So eftir jeust a day o rest,
Inga, Olaf an the tree o thir crew,
breeksed yet fae the muckle dance,
sail the rouk in sairch o Light.

Øyvind choss the kirk an no
the laancheen bay, preferran prayer
tae seean them aff: an aald wint
he thowt he'd tint at ruggid him

the day: some imp o fear demandan
his holy time an holy wirds.
He asks the gods tae mynd thaim on.
He nivver asks fer ower much.

Whan Inga sails an Øyvind prays,
teddert tae the staetion's tide,
a play o Lights noo taks tae tirlan
i'the yotun's brist an hoved hairt.

~

Higgie's deep i'the codd whan thay sail,
an deeper yet whan the screens ahint
is stairtan tae shaa the aerly signs
o a mortal stoor. Sheu caas the bays.

Thay'll send alairm tae ivry yole
tae come back in. She pits up a wird.

Sheu's deun whit sheu can deu. An than
her awn alairm begins tae skrek

an ivry screen at aence aizes
in error-light, an afore sheu can see
whit's whit a muckle root braks
fae the deck o the plant. Sheu rins tae see.

The faalds o pouer aroon the bots
is buljan an thratchan like a seck
o rattans, refractors an connectors
lipperan wi light, ivry een.

Whan sheu draps her hand, the Lights
is maed a spinnan triple helix
i'the plant's center. Sheu canno hear
alairms noo. Sheu only waatches.

~

Darling's at the bays fer the laanch,
sean hoo hid's deun. Sheu's thinkan
on tellan Astrid aboot the yole.
Will hid haad her, or gar her gang?

Darling kens whit future sheu waants,
but aither wey's a future. An than
Higgie's waarneen o the stoor comes.
Ivry Lighter kens the wurd:

this een coudno be warse. Sheu mynd
some aald emerjency on Mars,
some mairket crash, an whit wey her faithers
wis leukan that night: fill skaeliement,

lampan an yappan intae thir screens
whill thay thowt thay'd taen control.
But here the fock is naet o feet

an only spaek wi quiet voyces:

aa the rhythm sheu saa i'the dance,
an naen o the joy. Sheu offers tae help
an gits a piece tae stand. Sheu kens
enough by noo tae wait an haad

jeust whit sheu's gien tae haad, an pull
whan telt tae pull. Sheu coonts the yoles,
coonts the fock coman aff the yoles.
Sheu kens the coont gey weel the day.

An aa this time, ayont the dyke
at haads the air an separaets
the bay fae space, the Lights is hurlan
ower the yotun's faem: colour

an paitren ayont a artist's mare.
Helix, heid, matrix, mooth:
Darling pits her back tae space
an begs the coont tae come oot right.

~

Thay wirno chansan. Olaf taks
a haad o Inga's impsan, haads
tae whit is aye been shuir. But first
tae laanch means noo thir mosst deep.

Hid disno deu tae mak a coont
o whit's mistaek an whit's misanter:
thir no a puckle o meaneen atween them
whan skeel is meetan the cast o time.

The yole an hids fock deu whit they can.
An the yotun's wind an clood an Lights
is a brutal wheel birlan aa
aroon the stoor's teum ee.

~

Eynar is comed tae Noor at the Hofn,
waitan in her offiece. A oor
till sheu's back, lukkan wyld
an peelie-wally. He's maed tea.

"We missed thee at the Haa," he says.
Sheu tirvs the muckle pilot glivs
an vacuum-insulaeted gansey,
taks her tea an leuks tae him.

"The Dance?" sheu says. "Oh. I'm sorry.
I lost track of the days." He shrugs.
"I doot hid's ferly busy oot here."
Sheu haals her mynd intae the reum.

"Listen," sheu says, "I think I've found . . .
There's something . . . the station . . . there's something changing—"
"Yass," says Eynar, nervish. "That's why
A'm here. A'm waantan advice, fae a body—"

(the wirds is teuman oot) "—at's mibbe
traivelled a bit, so A'm here, an mibbe—"
"No," says Noor, "I mean— the Lights,
it all makes sense— the wrecks— I mean—"

But Eynar's een is coman wide.
He draps his cup. Hid hits the deck
an lands in sic a wey hid spins.
The nott o hids skuther o poly on metal

risan as it settles. Noor waits
fer the spin tae stop, an kens, an turns.
An ivry wrack ootbye is appenan.
More flooer as doar. Fractal lines

in reid an gowd spraed ower the waas

the slite plaens faaldan oot –
as gangweys? petals? Sheu sees the laefs
(trees? beuks?) wis hadden by

the maesures sheu's maed. Eynar yatters.
Sheu canno hear. Sheu's ferfil caam.
Anunder ivry laef anither.
An than inside? Noor drinks an waits.

~

Whan Darling's waitan fer the laast,
an Inga oot i'the laast is fightan
wind an tide, an Higgie an Noor
is waatchan thir unfaaldan Light,

Astrid haes the shutters doon
an cruises slockit. Anunder her blanket,
ower thin, sheu's tryan tae haad
the pivveran pairts o hersel taegither.

This morneen sheu peyed her ticket back
fae haem tae haem, tae flit as seun
as the morn's morn, an isno telt
anither saal. Sheu disno hiv

tae gang. Hid's her fock here. Hid's Darling
here. Thir maan be a wey tae bide.
Sheu disno hiv tae gang, but that
wis the laast o her credit fae Mars i'the ticket.

Sheu's stuck hersel flittan or stuck hersel here:
yass, sheu's ferly stucken hersel
i'the sam bed sheu's gret in noo
fae sax year aald. Hid disno ken

the answer aither. Mibbe sheu'll plan
tae loup fae ship tae ship an quyt

this notion o haem, lowse hersel
intae flittan, find anither

staetion, twatree ither planets,
a galaxy. Thinkan this
stills her skin fer a peedie while.
Sheu mynds on than that even a comet

is rived by the weyght o whit hid passes,
an whan hid's fired ootower the starns,
the starns is tirlid by thir awn wheel,
an that wheel tirlid in anither wheel,

til ivry escaep is anither orbit,
an ivry orbit anither still,
an ivry still aye makkan the promiese
that wi a tirl thoo'll win tae free.



Stormduststrife

The gas giant is stillfixedsecretsilent when they launch, or seems
stillfixedsecretsilent: its swellwaves of gas more glass than
whirlrushdancespinning wind. But from this distance, wind is stillpeaceful
and fire is cold.

So after only one day of rest, Inga and Olaf and all three of their crew,
still exhaustedbroken from the greatbig dance, sail the fogfrost in search of
Light.

Øyvind chose the church and not the launch hangar, preferring prayer to
seeing them off, an old habitcustompractice he thought he'd lost that
teargnawknotted him

today: some devil of fear demanding his holy time and holy words. He
asks the gods to rememberknowreflectwill them. He never asks for very
much.

As Inga sails and Øyvind prays, tethered to the station's seatimetide, a play of Lights begins turntwistwhirlspinning in the gas giant's squeeze-pressbruised and swollenrisen heart.

~

Higgie's deep in code when they sail, and deeper still when the screens behind start showing the early signs of a deathly stormstrifestrainspeeddust. She calls the hangars.

They will send alarm to every boat to come back in. She prays. She's done what she can do. And then her own alarm begins to yellscreech

and every screen at once blazes in error-light, and before she can see what's what a greatbig roarbellow breaks from the floor of the plant. She runs to see.

The fieldstrandfolds of power around the machines are bulging and writhing like a sack of rats, refractors and connectors overflowing with light, each one.

When she drops her hand, the Lights have made a spinning triple helix in the centre of the plant. She can't hear alarms now. She only watches.

~

Darling is in the hangar when they launch, seeing how it's done. She's thinking about telling Astrid about the boat. Will it hold her, or will it causeforce her to go?

Darling knows which future she wants, but either way is a future. And then Higgie's warning of the stormstrifestrainspeeddust comes. Every Lighter knows the word:

this one couldn't be worse. She rememberknowreflectwills some old emergency on Mars, some market crash, and whathowwherewhy her fathers looked that night: total scattersmashdisorder,

stridepacelurching and talknagbarking into their screens until they thought they'd taken control. But here people are neat of foot and only speak with quiet voices:

all the rhythm she saw in the dance, and none of the joy. She offers to help and gets a placedistancepartwhile to stand. She knows enough by now to wait and hold

only what she's given to hold, and pull when told to pull. She counts the boats, counts the people coming off the boats. She knows the count pretty well today.

And all this time, beyond the wallfieldbarrier that holds in the air and separates the hangar from space, the Lights are speedthrowrolldriving over the gas giant's foamfrothsea: colour

and pattern beyond an artist's nightmare. Helix, head, matrix, mouth: Darling puts her back to space and begs the count to come out right.

~

They weren't taking risks. Olaf holds back Inga's hurryeagerness, holds to what has always been sure. But being first out means they are the deepest in.

It's no use tallying what's a mistake and what's accidentmisfortune: there's not a grain of meaning in the difference between the two, when skill meets the luckthrowchance of time.

The boat and its people do what they can as the gas giant's wind and cloud and Lights are a brutal wheel whirlrushdancespinning all around the stormstrifestrainspeeddust's emptyhungry eye.

~

Eynar has come to Noor at the Havenharbour, waiting in her office. An hour until she gets back, looking wild and sickfeebleplain. He's made tea.

"We missed you at the Hall," he says. She strips off the greatbig pilot gloves and vacuum-insulated sweaterjersey, takes her tea and looks at him.

"The Dance?" she says. "Oh. I'm sorry. I lost track of the days." He shrugs. "I expect it's veryfairly busy out here." She hauls her mind into the room.

"Listen," she says, "I think I've found . . . there's something . . . the station . . . there's something changing—" "Yes," says Eynar, nervous. "That's why I'm here. I wantneed advice, from someone—"

(the words are pouremptying out) "—who's maybe travelled a bit, so I'm here, and maybe—" "No," says Noor, "I mean— the Lights, it makes sense— the wrecks— I mean—"

But Eynar's eyes are going wide. He drops his cup. It hits the deck and lands in just such a way that it spins. The note of its skimskip of

plasticpolymer on metal

rising as it settles. Noor waits for the spin to stop, and knows, and turns. And every wreck outside is opening. More like a flower than a door. Fractal lines

in red and gold spread over the walls, the smoothstilllevel planes foldstrandfielding out – as gangways? petals? She sees the leaves (trees? books?) were held by

the measures she has made. Eynar rambles. She can't hear. She's veryfearfully calm. Beneath each leaf another. And then inside? Noor drinks and waits.

~

When Darling's waiting for the last, and Inga out in the last is fighting wind and seatimetime, and Higgie and Noor are watching their unfoldfielding Light,

Astrid has the shutters down and sun-lamps turned off. Under her blanket, too thin, she's trying to hold the shakeragethrobbing parts of herself together.

This morning she buypayed her ticket back from home to home, to leaveflyescape as soon as the next morning, and she hasn't told another soul. She doesn't have

to go. Her people are here. Darling is here. There must be a way to waitstaylive. She doesn't have to go, but that was the last of her credit from Mars in the ticket.

She's stuck leaveflyescaping or stuck here: yes, she's fairly stuck herself in the same bed she's wept in since she was six years old. It doesn't know

the answer either. Maybe she'll plan to jumpspringvault from ship to ship and quit this ideaexperimentinvention of home, loosefree herself into leaveflyescaping, find another

station, a few other planets, a galaxy. Thinking this pauselellsecretsilences her skin for a little while. She rememberknowreflectwills then that even a comet

is ripbreakwrenched by the weight of what it passes, and when it's chuckthrowfired across the stars, the stars are turntwistspinwhirled by their own wheel, and that wheel turntwistspinwhirled in another wheel

until every escape is another orbit, and every orbit another
pauselullsecretsilence, and every pauselullsecretsilence forever making the
promise that with a turntwistspinwhirl you'll reachtravelachieve free.

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Notes and Thanks

The language here is a poetic register of the Orkney tongue. I tend towards North Isles pronunciation in my spelling, and borrow more from the broader stream of Scots than is common for Orkney. Alongside my own life and listening, my approach is built on Hugh Marwick's study, *The Orkney Norn*, Gregor Lamb's lexicon, *The Orkney Wordbook*, and grammar, *Whit Like the Day?*, as well as the *Orkney Dictionary*, written with Margaret Flaws. Important guides are the Orkney Sound Archive, the Orkney Reevlers group, and the canon of Orkney language literature, in particular C. M. Costie, Robert Rendall and Walter Traill Dennison. The page-foot prose translation method is learned from Robert Alan Jamieson and the combinatory translation method from Rody Gorman. All mistakes and inconsistencies are my own.

Versions of some poems have appeared in *Orkney Stoor*, *Multiverse*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, *The Scores*, *Poetry Wales*, *The Bottle Imp* and *Makar/Unmakar*.

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