



The Oldest Word

Johnny Firic

A Novel

The Azra

by Heinrich Heine

Daily walked the wondrously fair
Sultan's daughter at her leisure
in the evening by a fountain
where the foaming water rippled.

Daily stood a callow slave boy
in the evening by the fountain
where the foaming water rippled;
daily was he pale and paler.

One evening the princess stepped
toward him with these rushed words:
I will know your names, O slave, as well as
the names of your clan and homeland!

To which he then said: My name is
Mohammad. The land of my birth
is Yemen, and my kin are the
Azra, those who die if they love.

täglich ward er bleich und bleicher.
daily was he pale and paler.

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1 Tickets and Doughnuts

It started long before we were born. The name Birinaldi was no more than a story, to us she was always Maria Petrin.

We grew up in the same apartment block, the kind of Communist projects home to most everyone at the time. My family shared no special bond with the Petrins, but children of near age band together. Sharing a street number made us ‘gate friends’ in our slang. Four of us made up the ‘gate’ in our ‘street,’ meaning small neighborhood. I lived on the ground floor, Lana on the third, and Maria and Tino on the sixth, the top floor.

A three gate street meant about a dozen of us between little and older kids. Those below us, a level above babies, had to ask permission for anything. Older kids, nothing. Accumulating privileges led to ascension. Movement radius was one status symbol. Sporting gear and upscale toys were consolation gifts, later Commodore computers or staying up late. One would deny access to the latest toy or video game. The aggrieved might retaliate by playing at a derelict construction site taboo to the withholder.

By the time Maria and I started hanging out as a twosome we were teenagers with summer jobs at the marina. She was fluent in Italian, I was in English, while a girl named Zlata was bilingual German and Croatian. They had us doing chores for the yachters, giving directions, relaying messages. A good job, although it meant missing most of the summer. Hearing about stuff that

happened could never compare to taking part.

Maria was a brunette back then. She hinted at blonderness—as well as happy couple status—in her email, inviting me to her new family’s home in Italy. Specifically in the Marches, a short ferry ride and a shorter overland journey away.

Crossing the Adriatic can be magical regardless of mystery or romance on the other side.

Dry needles in the pine grove above the marina, where the four gate friends once rested. “Ocher snow,” Lana remarked. I thought, how does one say that? Where could that come from?

I must have been nine, of an age with Maria. Tino and Lana would have been about twelve. We were laying down on a limestone shelf with flinty outcrops, halfway home from the beach. The cricket choir discouraged casual conversation. We would have been tired anyway, mouths dry, tongues chafed with salt, when we heard the air raid siren.

Zhnyaan, Trstennik, Poshk, Firoule, Ovchitse, Baatchvitse: popular beaches a quarter-hour descent from our street. But no, we had slogged to the Institute because it was off limits to Sasha.

I was going on ten when full scale war broke out, yet this scene retains its power. Real fighting shied away from our hometown much like snow clouds;

instead we had air raid drills. Exciting disturbances in our school-family-play routine, weird spillovers into public life.

The uber-paranoid Communists had conveniently built fallout shelters under their projects and public buildings. Us kids had our own ideas about their usefulness, ‘nuclear’ being a big word in the late Eighties. Did it occur to the comrades the shelters might offer protection from their bombs?

Our standing orders were to reach the shelter a few minutes from the siren. This is why we freaked when we heard it in the marina parkland, clear across town. There could be no chance of getting to our neighborhood in time.

Sitting up, we exchanged looks, knowing potential solutions would have been brought up immediately.

“Run for it,” Tino suggested.

“Might as well wish for skateboards,” I retorted.

“Where will the yachters go?” Lana wondered.

“Yachters are grownups,” Tino pointed out. “They can do as they please.”

The siren went on and on.

“There’s no statute of limitations on crimes committed between the sirens,” Lana put in. I nodded with the siblings, trying to guess the meaning.

Doors were closing, windows, cupboards. Newspapers were being folded. Tens of thousands were seeking shelter as Maria was opening her mouth. “I know what we could do.”

“Church,” added in response to our looks. “Not *our* church, Saint Larry’s.

It's a church, they gotta have a bomb shelter. Tickets are tickets, doesn't matter where they're from."

Promising enough to brush off needles and twigs and roll up our towels. A gamely fast walk to Saint Larry's was soon a regular walk. The clergy's firmness on faith issues rarely extended to the likes of siren truancy. The church's otherness added a taste of adventure. We slowed to relish its nearing.

Saint Lawrence was built in stone in several stages. It has been redecorated heavily since the time of the story, against the wishes of many regulars. I had been there once during a Christmas visit to a cousin's in-laws. The dated frescoes and statues felt queasy after the austere modern Saint Pete's, which my family infrequented.

Even though church doors are never locked, the four kids procrastinated until Tino stepped forward and pushed them in. I remember feeling grateful for it.

A group of nuns being addressed by a senior turned toward the distraction. The one closest to us knowingly asked, "The shelter?" bringing up smiles at our nods.

A friendly pair led us down the nave. In the dim, echoing space, I recalled church bells replacing sirens in remote areas. The six of us knelt and crossed ourselves facing the altar. That touch of holy water is still a reassuring grip.

We followed our guides to a side room with three doors. The one on the right opened onto a staircase leading, expectedly, down. Warmth increased together with the smell of fresh pastries.

“Sisters are making fritters and doughnuts,” the younger nun explained. “With a few neighborhood women.”

“Fritters if they stay awhile,” the elder countered.

The stairs were smooth and cool, the walls roughly stuccoed, improper for a church. The basement setting seemed to make no difference.

Kitchen smells and sounds overpowered the bottom landing. We swept right past. A shorter flight of stairs led to the garage shelter, a long room with maybe a dozen priests, nuns and laypeople. The priests were Franciscan friars, a welcome sight to us. In many parts of the world friars spend more time with the population and are generally easier-going. Two young deacons quit playing table tennis as we walked in and the sisters explained our situation.

One racket-holding deacon inquired after the bake off. The other tried to interest us in the game. Tino held out for a few shots against the appositely monikered Chinaman of the Cloth. Fortunately the doughnuts soon made an appearance, dissolving the talk. We were down to licking our fingers when a nun told us “Here. For your parents,” while handing out tickets.

Tickets meant wallet sized religious pamphlets and pictures. One or two

could be found on a park bench as the comrades' vigilance deteriorated. A half dozen in mint condition would convince grownups we sat out the drill in a church. That we were good for the sirens. If they asked, we would of course claim our neighborhood church, Saint Pete's. Hence Maria's 'doesn't matter where they're from.' The expression originated in the need to produce them for inspection like tickets on the city bus—where juvenile passengers continue to be the inspectors' prime suspects.

In many churches tickets were handed out after the all-clear sirens as well. Traded more than signed notes as they weren't personalized, though note trading among the identically named did exist. In emergencies one turned to a broker.

Grownups were amused by the ticket hustle. I remember my mom recounting tickets having come up 'over coffee' with another mom. The parent generation began their withdrawal from social life around this period. War impacted our area not through killing or destruction but the shortages of everything, to the point of having coffee to serve visitors being an issue. Dropping by unannounced was no longer a done thing. As the old etiquette ruled out arriving empty-handed, few families invited anyone over for fear of putting them through this inessential expense. Which must at some point be reciprocated. I vividly remember my parents insisting the visitors 'shouldn't bring anything, that's nonsense, really.' They must have said this a hundred times in my hearing alone.

Us kids were half aware of these unconcerning facts as we continued our

own socialization in the Nineties. Maria was smart, Tino was tough, I was hard-working, while Lana had the creative/dreamer subtlety a more jaded culture might have made suicidal. My sister, six years younger, had her scene. She can never be a part of ours even now as we are pushing for middle age. A senior Millennial to our junior Generation X.

We had been four gate friends for years when those sirens sounded. Nevertheless, I realize why that recollection answered how my friendship with Maria Birinaldi began. On that day a separate person had sprouted from an organ in our group body.

2 The Dissident Progenitor

White bathroom surfaces add to the chill of a sunny day in the Marches. The land is elevated here, the terrain rugged. Temperature is low despite proximity to the coast, and weather taken seriously. Cloud movement looks vaguely intimidating through the tiny louver window.

The bathroom is old but well made, showing few signs of wear and tear, in line with the rest of the house. The rustic natural finish window casements. Brass faucets creak as I turn them off, one for hot water and one for cold. The ceiling light is not on. Shifting shadows are a mirage second presence in the room. Lingering seems unwise given that Maria is my only acquaintance in a crowded house and my Italian rather rusty.

I shut the door behind me and enter the hallway. The bathroom is at its end. A team of workers is struggling with an ornate mirror in front of me. Waiting for them to make way has no obvious alternative.

A day after the auction, unsold items are being boxed off and sent to the family's other estates. Or being given away. The country house where old Gramps Birinaldi spent most of his life is being demolished, though the land's repurposing evades me. A highway, at a guess.

The assorted oddments brought in very little. Anything personally treasured by a family member was being kept. The auction was a compromise prevention

of unseemly haggling over trinkets.

Maria may not have had my closest attention as she was bringing me up to speed during the hourlong drive from Ancona harbor. I had spent a short night on the waves.

With no close friends left in Dalmatia, Maria had been using the language intermittently at best. She spoke out of delight with the cascading sounds, making no real attempt at conversation. While I did weigh in a few times, I was there to listen.

I remember a song on the radio, a London accent repeating the line “We all smile. We all sing.”

Steps in the hallway. Daylight shafts down the eggshell wainscoting.

“Johnny?”

Italians pause midname. “Toosan.” Yeah, I’m here.

“You can get back to the garden from the study. Second room on the left past the bathroom.”

I look around. “The left.”

“This side.” Slaps the wall a couple of times. “Bathroom, one, two. I’m in the garden.”

“Alright.”

Her instructions lead to an old fashioned study. Its centerpiece is a huge desk facing imposing bookcases. Serial tomes like encyclopedias, anthologies, volumes of periodicals.

Past the garden door, there she is, a blond lady hard to equate with the girl I once knew. Smoking in the shade of tall resinous trees with splayed branches. Something like a cross between cypress and oak.

“Welcome back.”

“Thanks. What trees are those?”

“Cedars,” answers without turning. “Three meters tall when Gramps planted them.”

That’s ten feet, meaning they have quadrupled. “Wow.”

“You can eat their skin.”

“Bark. Rind. Wow.”

“On its own, or candied.”

“No kidding.”

We are standing on a patio with mosaic flooring. The patterns are abstract, vibrantly colored tracteries glowing in the sun.

“Funny how ‘variegated’ is such an uncommon word in English. I mean, there’s ‘colorful,’ but that’s like saying *yaakeeh boyaa*, it’s not synonymous.”

Maria shrugs. “Tells you something about the people.”

Neither knows what to expect from this conversation. She has made no reference to what brought me here. ‘Something I’d like to show you.’

Follows my gaze. “They’re smallish for cedars, you know. There’s plenty of sunlight here. They’re not done growing.”

“I hope they won’t be cut down.”

“No, no. They might be moved, I don’t think so. I’m sure it would’ve come up.”

“Those books—you said he wasn’t, like, scholarly?”

“Oh, they’re, ah, this aunt’s who was supposed to move in. One of the few with whom Gramps kept in touch.” Noun cases make it sound natural. “The moving in failed to materialize. Her stuff, no one’s ever claimed it.”

I look left in the general direction of the study.

“They’re law books. Can’t think of the word. Not the defense lawyer, the accuser?”

“Toozhitelyitsa.”

“Yeah. She was a prosecutress in Abruzzo.”

“Damn.”

Grin. “Yeah. Yeah. They say she was a pretty tough lady. There’s stuff named after her.”

Goes on about Gramps having planted the saplings after returning from the Great War. A memorial to fallen friends. Decorated the garden himself, and installed the house’s furniture and fixtures. “Without any help from anyone. Other than, you know, the most basic manual labor. People would bring stuff up here, that’s it. There’s a story of training up a special needs guy as a bricklayer.”

Shared smile. “Imagine how sad it makes them.”

Questioning look.

“That age group. Not just in this country. Anywhere. Their penchant for

self-reliance. Self-sufficiency. The ability to fix broken household items, for example. What it must be like for them, bequeathing the world to degenerate plutocratic weaklings.”

Another smile as we look at the trees. “I’m still thinking about what you said. I’ve never used half those words in conversation.”

“You forget after a while. Read books. Gramps was posted in Africa, wasn’t he?”

Nod.

“He was the Birinaldi patriarch. The progenitor.”

“That’s right. He was the dissident.” Searching look over shoulder. We are speaking the inimitable Split dialect of Croatian, but *Africa* and *Birinaldi* are the same to everyone.

“The aunt never lived here?”

“Only her stuff.”

What could I change the subject to? Fill her in on people from our old neighborhood? She would think me petty and sentimental. What else do we have in common?

“A fitting way to honor the departed,” I state without good cause.

The great organizer, finder of lost families, makes a wordless sound of agreement.

Balconies are denuded of flowerpots.

“Onaa babba tammo,” my friend says, that grandma over there.

The lady in question is done hanging up sheets to dry. A short, rotund figure entering and exiting magnificent tree-shadows, passing ranks of fluttering white sails. Grass is stippled with daisies and dandelions. Girls outnumber boys in an informal soccer game.

“She was Gramps’ special someone, way back in the day.”

“Is that right?”

Vaporing waltz around the things we want. Problem is, we were little more than children the last time we had spoken. Having spent key formative years oceans apart, we are something more sinister than strangers. We are embarrassed by our newfangled disparities, her wealth and my worldliness.

During the morning drive she made a remark about ceramics. I followed up with a mention of my Laotian friend, an excellent ceramicist residing in the United States. But Maria had never heard of Laos, whereas I had never heard of the Parisian artisan whose few surviving works were so highly prized. A tea service had turned up only the day before, with the auction underway. By the early afternoon under the cedars I could no longer recall the nasal French name. The same likely applied to Maria regarding the Land of a Million Elephants.

She is looking at the washerwoman as someone walks up to us with a question. I can make out only the opening *should we*.

“Si, certo,” answers (yes, of course) and the man retreats.

Her eyes go back to the woman with a laundry tub under one meaty arm. We can’t see the person holding the door for her.

Head inclined toward me without turning. “If it hadn’t been for her, I never would’ve found the key to the chest which Gramps left me.”

Inoffensive grin. “What was in the chest, treasure?”

“In the chest was the reason I got in touch.”

Once again, no explanation is forthcoming. The slow, irregular rhythm, the Dalmatian mindset: what she misses more than anything, what she wants from me.

People circulate as the Sun drifts in and out of cover. Most are augmenting incessant talk using various body parts and objects they are holding.

Gramps Birinaldi’s existence was brought to my attention about a week ago. I am deeply moved by the obdurate country entrenchment having underpinned two thirds of his life. A private rebellion against ‘the city’ which claimed the lives of three of his four sons. The fourth went off into the unknown after staying in Split long enough to father Tino and Maria.

Gramps got to shoot at people during both world wars. As Italy switched sides multiple times during each conflict the enemies came and went, making it difficult to think of a uniform never caught in his crosshairs. The Old House, however, remained impregnable. No enemy had ever set foot on the grounds. A dispiriting patina on the property’s demise.

“Whose...”

Looks over.

“It was someone else’s nickname originally. Not his. If I remember

correctly.”

“It’s a local name. It’s ancient. It means, like, rebel. Lone wolf.”

“And he got stuck with it as a young man...”

“When he refused to, bow down before the family elders.”

“Taakoye, seechance.” Gotcha, I remember now.

Young Gramps had inherited a craggy tract worthless as farmland or real estate. Fell under its spell on sight, rebuilt an ancient house, planted cedars and escalated the family feud to the level of replacing his last name with his nickname.

Seventy years later, Maria’s search for her father’s ancestry led her to the affluent Birinaldis. Their history left them especially well disposed to reunions with maverick scions.

“In our language you can’t easily say *arms and hands* like in English. You can say arms and fists, or arms and palms. There’s also *tseele rhouke*.” Entire arms.

“Imagine that.” Grinning, having finished her cigaret. Third since we came.
“Wanna see it?”

“The reason.”

Grin gives way to an energetic nod. Head lowered, I spread my hands, meaning No objections.

A door arched with ivy and flanked with bushy ferns. The old blue pots are in themselves picturesque.

A hallway identical to the one the mirror carriers were negotiating.

“My room.” A redundant announcement as we are looking at a night view of our hometown on the wall.

Down on the floor, surrounded by lamps and a four poster bed, a robust looking chest awaits, wide open. A chest two people would have trouble lifting. Inside, what is that, bedding?

“The chest was locked when, when I got it. The lawyer could tell me nothing, family I talked to, ditto. When I finally opened it, it had, it had fancy linen and silverware, you know, stuff that...”

“Dowry. It’s a hope chest.” For the first time since we got in touch she is more uncomfortable than I am.

“Ondaa onaa debbela babba vaanka.”

“Eshta?”

(Then there’s the stout grandma outside. Yeah, what about her?)

Maria’s knitted brow causes immediate misgivings regarding my contribution, modest as it was.

“You keep mentioning English. What’s the expression for having sex with, like, straw or hay?”

“Rolling in the hay,” I offer with a smile. “Vaalyanyeu seeyennu.”

The conversation is redolent with the air of our country, Dalmatia, a slower, more relaxed place than beehivish Italy. Steering clear of eye contact, dwelling on trivia, pauses, abrupt subject changes—an outsider might think it no less a

caricature than the tongue twisters.

“Taaakoye,” Maria says (thaaat’s right) as I visualize the singer Misho Kovach’s signature chest hair. “Rolling in the hay.” Smirking head shake, perhaps thinking of the English nation’s strange apartheid. “I don’t know what she looked like back then, but I’ve seen pictures of young Gramps. He was handsome as hell. A dashing mustache, old school officer’s uniform, and the two of them are literally rolling in the hay, in a barn—the house was under construction—this *key* in his breast pocket feels awkward—she takes it out and throws it away.”

At her look I make head movements reaffirming my commitment to the story. Inwardly I frown upon the Italianism.

“A thousand years later I’m going round the place looking for a key. Some random mysterious key no one’s ever seen. This old lady tells me she specifically remembers the *clang clang clang* as the key fell down a storm drain.

“She took like a quarter hour to get to the key when she was telling me the story. His inexperience surprised her given he’d fought in, you know, foreign wars, she took the lead—anyhow, *the barn burned down* a few years later. That’s where I found it, in the ruins. What’s left of the barn’s there, behind that—behind those oleanders—and the old storm drain’s buried under dirt and what not, but it’s still there. That’s where I found the key.”

Listening and nodding is untenable. “You want me to look at the key.”

“No, it’s, I just thought it was a good story. Never mind.” Turns to a dresser,

picks something up. “This is it. Everything in the chest is bottom drawer stuff except for this.”

It turns out to be a nondescript wooden box the size of a suitcase, black in the half-light. Too heavy to be empty.

“Open it.”

I nod toward the bed. “Can I?”

“Go on.”

I sit on the bed and carefully open the box in my lap. Maria has turned the lights on. The lid offers curious resistance, making me expect a spring or a magnet. A look inside suggests the box is far more ancient. Rolls and scraps of ancient writing, all foxed and stiff, most visibly predating Gramps by centuries rather than decades.

Pages rustle for a minute amid sounds from outside. Arabic writing, medieval illuminations, Egyptian hieratics.

Her next to me.

“Täglich ward er bleich und bleicher.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. Unbelievable.”

“Can you read any of it?”

“Sight-read? You mean, can I tell you what it says by looking at it? The answer’s no. Sorry. I can try and guess what some of it is, that’s, I mean”

“Did you get to the bottom?”

Hooks her fingers, meaning *reach underneath*. Moving my hand gingerly so as not to damage the priceless relics, I feel a thicker object. Making room with my left, I pull it out with my right.

Next thing I know, I am gaping at a clay tablet densely filled with cuneiform script, two thousand years old at the very least. Possibly more than twice that.

“I think that’s the oldest thing in the box. There’s three of those. I think you got the biggest.”

I look at her, but am unable to reply. This makes her laugh. Gently, ever so gently, I place the tablet on a lacy pillow and close the box.

Footsteps outside. Throws another searching look. False alarm. Moves to stand in front of me. “Lemme tell you what I find most baffling about all this. It’s completely unlike Gramps. Damee ostavee,” to leave me, “dameye ostavia,” to left me, “damiye ostavia,” to have left me, like you said, a hope chest, that’s reasonable. He may have forgotten an unrelated ancient box stuck there by accident. Doesn’t make a whole lotta sense—why not, for the sake of conversation. You’re losing hair, by the way. The chest, though, the chest was *locked*. Here’s the key I found, like I told you.”

Holds up an antique key with a long handle.

“I’m”

“It’s been lying, it, it’d been lying there all those years. I mean, it was super filthy and gross, believe me. There’s no other key to this chest. I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“I’m losing honest black Slavic hair, and Gramps could’ve gotten rid of his copy.”

She was shaking her head before I was done talking. “That’s what I’m saying, you didn’t know Gramps. He was like that neighbor who used to give us cookies. Remember? Second gate from ours I think, toward the gas station.”

“Mrs. Nola.”

Another strong nod. “He was just like her. He would stop and talk to little kids. He would pat the ugliest puppies. I told you he wasn’t, he didn’t play mind games. He was a straightforward person who liked gardening, not—not—”

“Wanton women.”

A noncommittal “mm” in search of words to describe what Gramps either was or was not. I find this discussion far less appealing than the further exploration of the box’s contents.

Catches me stealing a look at the cuneiform tablet. “Anyhow. Gramps is for me to figure out. I was hoping you’d take this box, and, you know, figure it out. I was hoping you could tell me what this is and why he kept it, you know?”

“Why it’s yours.”

“Exactly.”

“I do believe I came up with a plan a couple days ago.”

3 Truth from Numbers

A clattering buzz like an automated assembly line as the door is unlocked.

“I’m seeing midgets.”

“Your mom saw a giant last night.”

Squeezing past my old street buddy.

The whizzing or clacking is louder, if hardly more distinct, during my blindness. Recognition hovers out of reach.

“Foncy paint?”

An unintentional parody of British English. His T hangs off a cliff like an action hero.

“Aakoshittee.” If you’re having one, sure.

After a shared nod we go our separate ways: he toward the kitchen and I, the balcony.

His apartment looks and smells as though a garbage truck vomited inside, a trait common to the handful of Dalmatian bachelors not living with their moms. The balcony is thus the usual hangout. I step over stomach-turning welters into bright light and sweet open air.

The balcony is long and narrow. I pick out one of the three cheap looking plastic chairs. A coffee table completes the set. I suspect all of it is missing from some cafe terrace.

Shortly my host rejoins me, holding tall frosted cans of

“Guinness! Irish hospitality, thanks.”

“You’re welcome, hobbit.” Shrugs sitting down next to me. “You got me hooked on them when you made that dinner that time.”

I may never have called him Sasha once in my life. His parents had shrewdly invested in real estate before the war. Consequently they managed to keep some of their money unlike pretty much everyone else. This is how Curls got to enjoy his view of trees and mountains as opposed to the parking lot of the projects like the rest of us. The zoning official and chemical engineer retired early after being marginalized due to prominence under the old regime.

Twentieth century’s greatest invention has gone up and down a few times.

“So what gives? I’m curious. You’re not one for popping over just to hang out.”

“I’ll tell you in a minute. I wanna know something first. What the hell is that, it sounds like robots having tantric sex.”

Laughing, tips the can once more.

“I’m making bread in one of those little machines.” My look encourages the addition of, “My mom bought me one.”

Laughing would be detrimental to the pending solicitation.

We are facing a vacant lot with demolished foundations still showing. The chirring of crickets is contesting the cooing of ringdoves, and winning.

“Site like this in the inner city, an informal trash dump.”

Nods. "For sure."

"What is it with you and construction sites?"

"What?"

"Or no, that was the Institute, my bad."

"What?"

"Never mind. Lotta time on your hands these days?"

"What do you think?" Tone steeped in a smile.

"I think you can't wait to have something to do."

"Define something."

"Translating ancient texts."

Mulls. "Texts, plural."

"A shit ton of a plural. More than thirty. Whole bunch of countries, different eras. Documents, tablets, nemma shta nemma."

"Plyachkash pomuzeyima?" (the works. You've taken to robbing museums?) Straight face, also looking at the green reclamation of urban waste.

"You don't see stuff like this in any random museum."

A look meaning *Kindly explain forthwith*.

"One longer cuneiform piece and two shorter. Arabic with and without the little, um..."

"Diacritics."

"There you go. Lots of hieratic. There's stuff from all over the place. Some is calligraphy, some is obviously shorthand. I'd say even scrawl. Can't be from

just one or two sources. Way too random for, for a, purposeful assemblage. Someone I know inherited it. Nobody knows why, or what any of it says.”

“I see.”

“The deceased wasn’t like a collector or anything like that.”

Traffic strangles my closing remark. We are blissfully shaded by trees and buildings while the sun is bright on others. There is no way he will refuse such a project. If I asked him he would accept after a half hour of joking. Much better to plod along assuming he is up for it.

“I scanned the documents and took photos of the, you know, tablets and whatever couldn’t fit in the scanner, so there’s no danger to the originals.”

I unpocket a ladybug flash disk.

“Nice big images?”

“Forty, fifty megs on average uncompressed. Thereabouts.”

Moves tongue in front of lower teeth, possibly trying to recall taking the job. “Alright.” We turn from my flash disk back to the trees. “It is gonna be a lot of work—though it does sound intriguing. I’ll do it if you level with me. Why are you doing this? Who would entrust *you* with a trove like that?”

“Maria.”

“Ooh.” Sage nod. “Maria Barakaldo. Same old boat, then.”

“Remind me again about the bread machine.”

“You know what? Fuck you. I’m guessing it’s from her dad’s pirate chest, or was he locked up, or, help me out.”

“Well, you got the chest part right. The name’s Birinaldi. It’s from her grandpa. I gotta tell you about him another time. Her dad now, since you’re asking, he went missing years ago. Last seen right here in Split I think. Went off to, I wanna say Bangkok. Who knows if he’s still alive. I doubt he had anything to do with this.”

“You’re hoping the results will impress her.”

‘Impress’ is a sausage in Croatian, ‘imprheseoneerhat.’ It allows a parry.

“If I was hoping to impress anybody, or to be impressed myself, I wouldn’t be putting my faith in you.”

Breaks into a grin. I grin back at him.

“Gimme that flash, you prick, if your stubby arm’s got the reach, that is.”

When I prove it does, he eyeballs the ladybug in an apparent attempt at hypnosis. Draws breath. Half turns to me.

“I’m sure you understand it’s best to work on one thing at a time.”

I have given this no little thought. “I don’t imagine any of it predates the cuneiform.”

“You’re probably right. But do the two of you, I wonder if the wise brunette has any idea how many languages used cuneiform. Dissimilar, unrelated languages. I’ve got frequency tables and corpuses—I’ve got everything I need for Akkadian, late Shumirian, Hittite and Persian. Chances are it’s in one of those. If it’s not, it could take me weeks to figure out the language, maybe months to translate.”

“Comforting to hear you’ve got late Shoshone covered. I hope it’s in that.”

Pretends to be offended, tips his Guinness upright, gives in. Too funny. The sound *shoshonski* overlaps ‘nerdy’ and ‘dorky,’ prompting a self-recognizing laugh against better judgment.

“Late Shoshone.” Head shake. “You little scent mark.”

The crickets are soothing and inspiring. Are we done talking?

Makes a move to get up. “What day is it today?”

“Friday,” I answer. No love lost between him and the private sector.

“*Speedy Gonzales* pizzeria, remember?”

“Sure.” Thumb over shoulder. “Passed it on the way here.”

“They’re open till eleven forty-five for pickups. Get the jumbo Inferno Brutalik, with triple extra hot peppers.”

I approve. My order would have been much the same.

“Do you...” need money looted from the so-called taxpayers?

“I’m good.”

“Alright.” With the apartment and the parents’ pensions, he is living the welfare stater’s dream. “I should have something for you by then. Shoshone dolt.” Chuckles as he goes through the bedroom door. “Hold on a second.”

He will never, ever get off his ass, no matter what. Not if hostile aliens landed.

The ladybug is missing its head as he hands it back. “Tell me.”

“The top.”

“Oh.”

The search takes longer than the file transfer. I try not to invent origin stories for his rancid dining room.

“Here you go.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“What?”

“What do you mean, what? What’s that yellow I see?”

“Mustard.”

“You should breathe fucking mustard, you disgusting eyesore.”

His smile is apologetic but contemptuous. “Nesh tee.” Big deal. Wipes the mustard on pajama pants, smack on the front. “Kolishno.” Tiny little bit.

“I should’ve licked it off.”

“Pretty much.” Moment’s consideration. “I would’ve used a finger.”

“Instead of applying tongue to bug’s head. Reasonable.”

Makes no move to follow me into the hallway.

“You’d seriously have licked it off your finger.”

“Why let it go to waste?”

“If you adopt, the only path to family on account of who would have you, will you teach kids to do that? In public, or at Smug Party meetings?”

“You can see yourself out whenever. Shoshone swindler.”

The Sun wheels rightward and downward slower than a snail. Ten years previously, before my travels, a leisurely afternoon would have meant a full playbill. Two coffees with two cliques in two cafes. An amble around the stone-cobbled downtown, appreciating the women, the storefronts, the perseverance of quayside anglers. A video game. A spliff. The welding of time and achievement makes me an outcast in my impulsive boondocks home. I think of this back at the ground floor apartment during my parents' tale of grandnephews' pet turtles, cherubic like the owners.

Well ahead of time I phone in an order—preposterously self-conscious in my past life—for the Inferno Brutalik. Having collected at the appointed time, I retrace my lunchtime hoist up Visoka hill.

Two unpublished novels, a few stories, a lugubrious career in translation.

Making plans, lining up cause and effect. Plotting out world conquest.

Looking the wrong way.

"I've got good news and bad news," Curls announces before the door is fully opened.

"The good, if you please."

"Done with the cuneiform. Bigger one as well. Shorter texts, there's always gonna be variant readings. Hundreds of characters in sequence, there's no disagreeing on the overall meaning." Raises his voice to forestall my interruption. "THEY'RE FRAGMENTS FROM TWO WELL KNOWN poems. No random snippets, we're talking powerful passages. Poignant stuff. I'd say

they were someone's favorites."

"Gotcha." The unlit entry is smothering the pizza. "Dude, let's sit on the balcony."

Gestures down the nauseating hallway. Minutes pass without any conversation. When he has seen to a third slice I ask,

"That's the good news?"

"I guess kinda both. The good news is I've put in a swing shift weaving an exquisite tapestry of numbers. The good news is we've proved once again numbers don't lie. It's good that I'm done with it, bad that it's not some earth-shattering breakthrough. They're two well known poems. The major one is referred to as *The Lament for Shumer and Urim*. The other poem, we're less sure what to call it. NEVER MIND. THE TABLETS, they're very valuable just as redactions. Just for existing. They don't add anything to what we already knew."

"Are they in late Sho"

"Nesserhy" (cut the crap), pointing a threatening finger. Midswig it comes off more like *nomswrgm*, though the meaning is clear enough.

Having swallowed, goes on. "*Shumer* is the correct form of *Sumer*. The poem is Shumirian. They called the city Urim. Others called it Uru, or Ur. The Arabic name is Waarka. The other city has a similar name, Uruk."

"Other city?"

"The two poems refer to two cities."

Clouds collide with moonbeams. Air is too damp for either mosquitoes or

pedestrians. An undisturbed darkness cloaks the carobs and hornbeams.

“Pokrhilismo pissmou.” We’ve covered the poem. “Obbadvee pissme.” Both of the two poems. “The major one is pretty tragic, you may be weird enough to like it. The shortest gobbet is much older. Maybe the poems are important, it’s too soon to tell and, there’s something else. I’ve had time to skim through everything, just a cursory look-see. One thing in particular stands out. The most intriguing, hardest to explain.” Movement. “Eclipsing the other mysteries.”

You bet the bastard goes back to the pizza. And so we wait, fucking his proverbial mother, meaning no disrespect to Mrs Gorovich.

“It’s the stuff you thought was hieratic. It’s not. It does look similar. There’s something it resembles even more. The Voynich manuscript.”

“What-ich?”

Many Croatian last names end with -ich. Shaking his head, probably pitying the benighted, takes a long breath. Exhales. Opens his mouth.

“Voynich is a handwritten book with drawings of plants no one can identify. *None* resemble any known *fossils*. The book could not be more mind-boggling than it is. It’s named after a twentieth century owner, but it’s ancient. Written in this indecipherable script, cover to cover, and written continuously. The ink didn’t have a chance to dry as the writer looked stuff up. Or stopped to think. He knew what he was doing.”

“Or she.”

Nods. “Or she.”

“Or a nonbinary person.”

“Or, yeah, that.”

“Women and children.”

“What?”

“Never mind. The book. Go ahead.”

“The Voynich manuscript is the most mysterious thing in the world. It’s the crown jewel of cryptanalysis. Some of your, let’s call it Script X, looks a lot like it came from Voynich. Other symbols look a lot like hieratic. They’re neither. I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

His report is underwhelming since Script X is unlikely to be deciphered any time soon. Worse, he is developing a fixation and conflating working with working on it.

“I bet you bawl every night.”

“Others get their turn.”

Devotes more time and attention to the pizza. Ice cubes clink in his honey jar drinking cup. Its slab serif label reads *Acacia-Rowan-Goldenrod*. The sickly orange street light makes reading disagreeable.

The Guinnesses were probably meant to go with his lunch and dinner.

“Many suspect Voynich is a hoax,” picks up his story about nothing pertinent or interesting. “There’s conspiracy theories, I guess that’s how it works, mysteries fascinate nutjobs. Not one symbol has been solved. Not one plant

looks like anything we know, and there's hundreds of them in the book.

Legitimate academics have been obsessed with it, driven to insanity."

"As in your case, or can it be less debilitating?"

Looks at a passing car with a smile. A tenured assistant professor on a sabbatical. Pushing against the railing, makes it squeak. Its base has worn away in places.

"The material written in Script X does have breaks. Nor is it likely that one person wrote it all. Maybe, maybe over a longer period. I don't think that's the case. The main thing, though, the main goal for us is to find *references* to Script X. After that we can hope to have something substantial transliterated within months. Or translated from a known language. But..."

"But what?"

Fingers cupped, lectures emphatically, pointing out the obvious as it were. "What makes Voynich indecipherable is *not being referred to* anywhere. There's nothing to compare him with. Even the plants. Stars in strange unknown constellations. Don't you see, you can't extract truth from numbers if you don't have any of the numbers. If I'm right in that some, or hopefully most, of what you gave me that's in known languages *refers to* stuff written in Script X—"

I feel confident enough to try and finish his thought. "You'll have found the right harpoon for your whale."

His smile broadens. "You really should be a writer."

"And you my friend, a parasitic wastrel. What'd you say that poem was

called?”

“I printed out translations for you.” Points toward the bedroom with flaxen locks. “Figured you’d want them in English.”

“Good man. Writer in what language?”

“Caribbean English.”

“Sweet pick. But I’d get, you know.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Considerate of his postprandial sit, I get up and step around him and the little table.

“Next to the computer. It’s stapled.”

Seems to be a printout from a website, a browser’s header and footer on each page. The sheaf feels too thick for the three small tablets until I note the highlighted sections.

“Thanks a lot. Good work. I’ll be on my way, then. Call me, I guess, when”

“When I’ve got something for you. Do me a favor and”

“See myself out. Sure thing. There was dogshit on your pizza.”

The Lament for Shumer and Urim

written around 2000 BC

opening stanzas

That appointed times overturn divine intent
And mighty storms gather, bringing doom
To the godlike power of Shumer,
Leaving his bountiful estates ungoverned.
That his townships are razed, his houses demolished,
His barns emptied of animals and destroyed
So that the rut is strangely hushed.
That a mother seeks not her child.
That its father calls not for his wife.
That a bride finds no joy in his embrace.
That his child thrives not, seated in his lap.
That no nurse can sing a lullaby.

That appointed times undo divine designs,
Bringing the nation's unity to an end.
That the favorable reign of kings
Gives way to unending devastation.
That both Tigris and Euphrates alter their courses.

That the painstakingly maintained canals lie derelict
As thorny creepers take over their embankments.
That unfailing oracles are disregarded,
Forcing people to seek refuge in arid wilds
Like swallows that, having once flown forth,
Never regain the nests of home.

That every living thing looks on its downfall.
That none seek the roads or set out on a journey.
That the city and its suburbs are reduced to mounds of rubble.
That hosts of raven haired patriots are annihilated.
That fertile fields brown untouched by plows.
That no seeds are sown, no cuttings grafted.
That the singing of shepherds is muted.
That butter and cheese no longer issue from the dairies.
That the bleating of lambs is cut short,
Of those who once were blessedly enclosed in sheepfolds
From which arose the delightful sounds of churning.

That plentiful herds are decimated.
That animal droppings vanish from roadways and streets.
That swamps dry out, turning to deserts.
That the parched earth is rent with fissures.
That green buds give way to mournful reeds.
That wetlands fester while orchards prove barren.
That bloated corpses disrupt the waterways.
That a husband turns away, saying not "O wife!"
That a mother turns away, saying not "O child!"

That an owner turns away, saying not "O land!"
That they turn away and are never heard from again.

That the realm unravels in disarray.
That Urim, shorn of friends and allies,
Is brought down like an aurochs
Marked and bound for sacrifice.
That all collapses from within.
That the great charging bull is brought low.
Urim, once so confident and strong,
The primeval seat of kingship, built on hallowed ground.

4 Our Duty

Herry lies on a bed of dry leaves and waits for his enemies.

He should be in control. It should be easy, after years of training. And yet he is running out of strength and resolve. His ordeal has been too severe, too persistent. Catching up from his slipstream, questions swarm like wasps. Who are these people? What do they want with his wife? Where could they be taking her?

Energy drains out as Herry settles into his sunken bed. Affection spirals toward its destination. Throughout his march, in all his squalid camps, that lode kept yielding. Although solitude is a crushing weight, nothing could dim his goddess' halo of elegance and seduction.

Duff shifts under his weight. A drop of water falls somewhere to his left. Eyes shut against the green light, braces up for further questions. How could they know he was on their trail? Are they spying on him? They could have led him astray or ambushed him any time. Why wait so long? How did they find his village to begin with?

The wife stealers have made no effort to cover their traces. Herry has been following them for weeks, north and east through the dreary stillness of the forest. The trail having forked, he knows he has been defeated.

Watery sunlight breaks through the canopy. Its tepid touch brightens the

insides of his eyelids, from wine red to crimson. No birds, no flowers. How could anyone live in this frigid wildwood? Why would anyone do that? Where could they be taking her?

In the early stages of his mission, a sunrise gazing saw him through the day. When a second one at sunset proved insufficient, he began making midday breaks. This means the end, one way or another. Either worms and roots, or happily ever after.

There can only be one explanation for the abductors having divided. Some are tracking back to come up behind him. Their freakish speed means he is days away from the main group despite his exertions. Neither weapons nor any way to obtain or make them. A strong young man, fearsome in a fight; how long can he last? Enough to accomplish anything?

His one flimsy hope, the last fuel for courage, is that anyone capable of moving at such speed can surely be reasoned with. They can't be *that* ignorant.

Can they?

Hired by someone. A rich person facing the deathbed, throwing one last, desperate die. Paying, how much, for a taste of his wife's blood.

What a horror, after everything they have been through.

Herry opens his eyes to a livid triangle cut out by vaulting branches. Slate. Blue. The answers are at hand. He must not fail her.

A sudden loud squish. No wind, nor animals big enough this far north. Gets up, looks, listens. Nothing. Tree trunks, fogbound deadfalls.

Without forethought, hugs a larch and starts climbing. Six feet up, nearly falls after hearing soft footsteps.

Two men and a woman.

No. Not her walk. That could be a boy, rather than a woman.

Of course she has been abducted. Of course she is not running away from him.

Having climbed down as quickly and quietly as he could, stills his body into obedience. Fog rags blur the three moving shapes' features, two bigger and one smaller and slimmer in front.

Each breath is more intense. His wife's name as spoken by cracking twigs. As each fades, another takes up the call. Svee, Svee, Svee.

No matter what, he must not fail her.

"Here he is."

Words in Herry's native language bring up images of a glorious past. Of being beholden to her family, their marriage no likelier than jumping to the Moon.

The talk machines, the music machines.

"It's Herry," a second voice booms out, full of both laughter and pain. A known voice. How could they have survived?

He may give that a thought if he makes it past the fear and fatigue.

An almond eyed boy emerges, the two of them close behind.

Friends. He could have called them friends.

Their first lesson had been that language and behavior could never suffice. Vim and Wim were welcomed, in fact they were needed, being identical twins. They could stay among their idols as long as they wished, learn anything they wished—it would make no difference. The two could never be like the five. Even though people with no training might be unable to tell, the twins would know the truth.

Aden looked ashamed as he spoke. They had eaten better food growing up, he said, and were poor teachers compared to their own.

Vim and Wim nonetheless thought that a bird flies low today and high tomorrow. That things change. That one day these wonderful beings may accept the new brothers among themselves as equals. Or almost equals.

Moments after finding the man who followed them for so long, Wim acknowledges the childishness of that hope.

Corbin and Garin laughed when they saw him. A tall thin man wearing rough fur wrappers. He shares their past. The images their thoughts invoke are fleeting, but vivid.

How about the man's thoughts.

Half starved and miserable, his thoughts are wistful, brittle, but as expansive as Corbin's and Garin's, as detailed. Sandbars with ripple marks, a bluff under a buttermilk Moon, a tide of shape and color, a mountain chain, a sunburst.

Astonishing. Fabulous. The grandeur, the variety. What a journey. Thunderheads swelling, eating up the sky—Wim is the sky—with rain showers and crashing waves below. Impatience jarringly paired with the heartbreak of experience. Awesome disabusing experience unfathomable to an outsider.

This from a man who looks more dead than alive.

Wim's youthful vigor, conditioned by weeks of training with the General's Sons, means he can encompass the imprint of the man's thought. He is able to tell where it begins and where it ends. Holding onto his meager torch, failing, longing for the strength to laugh at adversity.

The hardest part does seem the distancing of consciousness from distractions. The twins have learned to do this well enough to speak with each other from a distance. Aden said a lifetime of training might bring them no closer to achieving it with anyone else.

The purple eyed princess must be the famished man's wife. He had been afraid for her, angry, confused. The fear is not quite gone.

"What have you done with my wife? Why did you abduct her?"

Addressing the space between Corbin and Garin, observing the custom the twins have already adopted. His words are punches. Barbs of poisoned ice.

"If you asked my brother," Garin sounds casual, "he'd say it was our duty. You know how he goes on."

Corbin looks at Wim.

It's Herry after all, that old bastard. Looks like a cross between a drunken

caveman and a starving bear. According to him they're married.

"... fine," Garin is saying to the fur clad man. "My brother found this old"

Wim winks twice. All three notice it.

Tell him she's fine. Don't play with him. Don't crow. Tell him we thought she was a thrall. Ask him to come.

Repeating it out loud, Wim thinks he may be transmitting from Garin's saturnine younger brother Aden.

Fresh laughter from Corbin and Garin.

"Where?" Herry asks the air. "To your, astra is it?"

"My brother has these ideas." Garin is looking straight at Herry.

"Could've meant 'Come and get your wife,'" Corbin suggests. "We can bring her back faster, and untouched. We kept her out of the sun. We were careful about that. You can wait here, or go back to your village. Or, to your, abode."

"Did you think she was trying to—?"

More laughter. Wim is behind things. Astra might be the name of a village. At the end of the world, where they seem to be headed.

"Place you were sent for is this far north."

"East of here." Corbin looks down. "You can send her a message, obviously."

Before Herry can respond, the twins relay from Eric, the calm and lordly, leader of the General's Sons.

Do NOT invite him. He may try to kill us.

Herry's countenance verges on an embarrassed smile.

Two, three days away from it. Kept her out of the sun. We know where it is. Not wasting time. Taking no chances with her in sunlight. She's fine. Spoken to us a few times. Asked about you, no reaction. Not hearing this. Needs to be there. It's a classical connection. No way of knowing about the blood. We couldn't open it. You two, that was me, behave yourselves.

Herry's anger, or the part Wim feels, is a fire doused by its smoke. Eric's words have brought dearly needed comfort.

"A twin is with the others." Herry's voice has steadied.

Corbin nods. "They're doing well." Wim feels a warming fillip. No time to convey it to his brother.

"In these few weeks."

A follow-up nod. A part of Wim is bouncing in jubilation.

"Sister or brother? Not that it matters. Is it—the five of you?"

"Brother. As you heard, Aden wanted you to be the sixth and seventh. That he meant *come for the wife*, to me that's," Garin looks away from Herry, "improbable."

"Your sister?"

Once again Wim senses he is missing something complex. In the wake of Herry's question to Corbin, a hazy plume passes between the men, brushing Wim with abysmal loss. What a naive hope it had been to bridle this beast. What

a burden that would be. He must communicate his discoveries to his brother, along with Corbin's approbation.

"I could not be more sorry." Herry's eyes land on Corbin's face for the briefest instant. "She was the best of us all. Tell your brother and the Edricson I said that."

Water drips from a downcast limb. Three men and a boy. Garin looks at Herry again. "You kept her out of the sun all this time."

"Moved around at night. You said it was your duty."

"I said my brother might say that," Garin corrects him. "No way of knowing what's inside. Weapons, books." Turns his head. Wim thinks he has more, and he does. "Aden's always looking for patterns, he's incorrigible. Eric, Eric listens to the little raftbuilder, inexplicably. Her touch will open it. Or she needs to be there. The blood, I don't know, the blood is there if she is, a nick maybe. It wouldn't open for us."

"The three younger brothers near self-slaughtered."

With a snicker, Garin makes a hand movement as though in submission to Corbin.

The men exchange sensations of mayhem, calamity, needfulness. Wim stays away. The three younger brothers, Corbin said.

"My duty was to try and save her. Nowhere else I could've brought her."

"Have you heard about anyone else?"

Herry has not. Garin's words fade.

“No food since you started.”

“Low-hanging fruit,” Herry replies to Corbin. “Days, I thought. Never imagined it would take this long.”

“You know it’s coming down. There can be no escape. You should join us. Both.”

Vines hang from boughs. Rocks sit above ground. Breaths can be seen and heard. The three younger brothers.

“You know this, Corry?” Herry says. “Can you feel it?”

Wim beckons to the third younger brother and snaps back. Herry is turning his head without looking at any of them. A natural motion, polite, unobtrusive. Control over the body, Wim reminds them. Most essential.

“Too high up. Too diffuse.”

Too what?

I don’t know.

What’s too high up?

The danger from which the tent is protecting her. I think. They mentioned the Sun, wait.

“The winds up there, who knows. It’ll be weak, it won’t be—” Herry holds his breath. “Won’t be irreversible.”

Won’t be what?

I don’t know. Stop that.

“I was, I kept thinking about, about her being out in the sun. I mean, never

in her life and I thought, I swear I thought about, grace. Without weapons, and, you thought she was a thrall.”

Herry is picturing a shell necklace against tawny hair. The twins watch it skate away without understanding. Corbin and Garin look into the dirty-white distance. Wim’s eyes are busy flying from face to face, one-two-three, one-two-three.

Vim inquires as to how the conversation started.

Blood and duty backdropped by tall cities fallen into shadow hurtle between two indistinguishable, eager youths, past fog, musty air and feeble sunlight.

The past is as undiscovered as the future.

Bogomil Gyuzel

5 An Underground Palace

“What do you think, let’s hear it.”

Having looking around, my towhead interlocutor merely glances left and right. Takes in the dancers, fluid and enticing on the big screens. The crystal chandeliers multiplying the pulsing light. The fish shuffling aimlessly through their tanks.

“Looks like there won’t be a second visit.” Pats the sides of the taut leather armchair with both hands. Verdict pronounced, attention on me again. “Made of my volition.”

“The cure and the cause,” the music hammers away. “You, you’re the cure and the cause.”

Unlikely to be aware of the admission fee, or that they look you over before they let you buy the ticket. The manager heard my short but rare name and nodded us in. She knew I paid with my card over the phone. Sasha followed like a dog its owner, checking out the women, not noticing any of this.

“The cure and the cause of my blues.”

“Thing is, curly, you mentioned an underground palace. Here’s what I thought of, when you said that.”

“I’m guessing you know the word *astra*.”

“Sure.”

“Looked it up, didn’t really get it.”

A single-sentence explanation proves elusive as the waitress pops in and out of view. The player in me, the striker or wideout, begins his run into empty space, ahead of the ball. Friend neither sees the waitress nor thinks to look.

Quickly. “An astra is a weapon. Divine and heroic figures in the Indian mythology use these highly powerful weapons called astra. You summon them with a word of power, a mantra. Listen, let’s”

“You’re saying astra is never used for a place, or a type of place.”

Type of place? “Are you serious?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ninety percent of” what I know about “India comes from a book I read when I was maybe twelve. Let’s not” get carried away.

The waitress sneaks in as we draw apart. The social retard has kept the pressure up with the questions, missing my body language and the supermodel next to us.

“Good evening, welcome.”

“Good evening.” The striker’s chance can go to waste (the receiver can fumble the catch) or he can create a chance for himself. The time is now.

Now Curls is seeing the waitress. A goodly seeing unlikely to escape detection.

She’s taking my order first as I’m the one who responded. I might plausibly order for both since we have a table. Dealing with me is only professional, and

she wouldn't be working here if she was unprofessional. She would've been in this situation hundreds of times.

Her eyes are blue, green, hard to tell in the protean light. Although her face reveals no blemish I'm a grown man, inured to the effect of makeup.

Two electrifying seconds have passed. She is confident. Unassailable, though? I am stronger and much more experienced.

I pretend to have decided. "Can I have a Havana 'n' Coke, please."

Nods. Has to look at him. Work beats game like rock beats scissors. The focus in her eyes goes away, meaning I get to look at her. Not without an unforeseen stab of envy for whoever she looks at next.

She won't look back. According to the majority opinion, looking back is a sign. For a churchgoer it would be promiscuous. She would fail in my eyes if she looked back, given my native dialect.

Curls is seeing her midriff.

The slightest grin when his back stiffens, despite me being ordinary to her angelic.

"For me, a double espresso with a glass of milk, please. The milk, in a beer mug with ice. Thank you."

She nods and turns. He did thank her.

The legs are talking to us, unfazed by his bizarre order. We watch them sail away. Calm seas, dear legs.

"You like India."

“It’s a big place.” I turn around. “Hard to like everything about it. Or dislike. I like that all is one in India. You and the divine are the same. No intermediaries between the earthly and the absolute. I don’t think they achieved that anywhere else.”

“Sounds like a good idea. The pitfall might be deciding what to do. You know, which way to go. If every word everyone says is sacred.”

“Possibly. There’s no dearth of divinities. Astra is also the name of a German car.”

“Gotcha. It’s, *astra* seems to mean some type of place. Like the words *house* or *pharmacy*. You know, a place *category*, not a specific place.”

“What kind of pharmacy?”

“Just an example. Restaurant, factory. Type of place. I haven’t—haven’t—found—”

I clear my throat. “The time to tell you why we’re here.”

“Whatever happened to having drinks? Alright. So they enter the astra. The house, or we don’t know what it is. It’s a big, big place. The opening in the rock wall was like an outer gate. A short, straight tunnel led to the front door. What method was used to open or lock it...”

Head shake indicates what’s in store. What the house where they lived was like. He needs approval. The storybook legs, however, have spoken loudly unlike his short, straight tunnel.

What do you know, there she is. A slow night, a weeknight. The striker is set

for many chances.

Curls pours the steaming coffee into the beer mug with iced milk. The abomination.

“Next time you should try, ah,” they speak, “we make all kinds of coffee cocktails.”

“This is my favorite.” To credit the scoundrel, he does sound remorseful. The waitress turns to me with a look of revulsion studded with pity. I offer my thanks with a shrug. To try and maintain eye contact for a fraction of a second would mean defeat. She sets out in a new direction, out of my sight. Sasha Gorovich more than makes up for it. To many patrons his blatant staring is an amusing diversion.

“We pay at the end?”

Sip. No ice. Good call. Shoulders back. Grin.

“We got a table.”

“So?”

Neck toward dance floor. “So we can put our drinks down and don’t have to stand like these kloshars.”

My order comes to thirty-two martens, his eighteen. The annoying Dalmatian custom of paying separate means a tip of three from me unless I turn out super cheap. Eight is more likely for such an expensive drink. They’re allowed to hope that curly, having been caught out, might splash for twelve. Ten is the lowest note, and a coin tip is cheapskatish, borderline generous at best.

You round up to the ten even for street food.

“They can’t sit down.”

“Only if we invite them. Or if that couple invites them. Or those three women.”

“Why don’t they get a table?”

“You’ll have to ask them. My guess is, so they can afford a round of drinks.”

Tipping is an honor system, though. The only thing stopping us from leaving exact change is the absurdity after shelling out two hundred for the table. On a weeknight.

The same arithmetic applies after the more realistic three to five rounds.

From my perspective, body language implies the waitress doesn’t consider legs a major weapon in her arsenal of charm. Her not knowing it, or acting that way, has raised the stakes by ten times. Maybe more as she leaves, in the flush of live betting.

The Communist apologist is done with his commercial break. The EPP they used to call it, Economic Propaganda Programming. Why am I not here on my own?

Riddle me that, Havanacola.

“I picked up, I stumbled on, on something...”

Nope. The matter calls for further thought.

Curls comes from a ‘mixed marriage,’ which in old Yugoslavia meant

parents of 1½ or more nationalities out of the six or seven that made up the country. A single child conceived in middle age is typical for that demographic. Just as typically, neither parents nor son feel at home in the consumer society, with its onerous nuance and cynicism and bling. I had to warn him not to wear flip-flops when we spoke on the phone.

The whole business with the waitress, need it be mentioned, has flown right past him. The ostentatious decor, the looksie game with beauty queens who chat us up—trivial stuff. He might bring it up in a thousand years, when there's nothing left to talk about. We are now going on with the main event.

“... a reference to something located by the door,” his squirt sheds no light on nothing.

“That was what?”

“I don't know. I remember there was something I gleaned or surmised—I can't recall what it was. We don't know, we don't *yet* know, what was 'by the front door.' They would go down this staircase to what they called the 'turn-around room.'” Circles his hands in the air. “It was a small hallway, an entryway. It led to the atrium, or the, main room. Various rooms radiated from the atrium but there's never any mention of corners. So I think it must have had one rounded wall, or maybe it was all round.

“The turn-around room had two other doors.” Elbows on the table, brings his hands together with space between. Waves one. “The facilities, remember, on the phone?” One hand stops, the other starts. “The war room. Both of those are

mentioned a lot.” Lowers his arms. Pulls out a thoughtful look. “The Facilities, from what I’m gathering, were...”

Waiting.

“... some sort...”

Hello, Havanacola.

“... of library. That’s what I think. I think the facilities were *both* the reason the astra was constructed long before their time, and also the reason they went there.”

“Wasn’t it because it was built on a spring? A safe living space to sit out the disturbances, the disease or whatever. Wasn’t that the reason, isn’t that” what you said?

“It was, I did, that’s true.” Semi-agreeing wobbly nod. “The astra would be a really comfortable setting for that. Plus Eric and Aden would also have been after information even if, you know, the others wouldn’t.”

Something feels wrong. *Long before their time* he said, but the disturbances had been fairly recent. They survived because they were far away. Weeks or months passed since then, not many years.

The waitress is at a table nearby. I look at her, him. Her.

Feeling no desire to sidetrack or second-guess, I wave my left hand in the air, an inadvertent phone call aloha. “The other room you said was, what?”

“That’s right.” Nod makes me smile, as usual, at the assertive excitement of coffee drinkers. “The war room. The war room was their tradition. They were

military academy cadets. Not the only members, back in the day, more like the core. Can't tell yet if 'General's Sons' means them, the group of five orphan boys, or if it was maybe an informal name for the academy. Possibly the official name. I really don't know. Or maybe a semi-official name. This general Azeu founded it and was supposedly in charge. Of the five, Corbin and Erwin were brothers, and so were Garin and Aden. Tia was, I think, sister to"

"Corbin and Erwin."

"Mm-hm. Eric's siblings I haven't seen mentioned. And I don't know if they have family names or patronymics. Yet.

"Anyway. They had the tradition of naming a comfortable meeting room 'the war room.' They would discuss the big issues there, plans and reports from Aden about the weather conditions and so forth."

Sips the coffee concoction in a timeout from unexciting narration. The plethora of mundane detail is making me uncomfortable. A feeling one gets in conversations with some people. Not the first time I'm getting it from him. More specifically than our usual repartee, he has broken hibernation to do involuted work on my behalf. I'm waiting for an opportune moment to change the subject away from his research when he says, emphasis added,

"It was just the five of them. The twins weren't allowed into the meetings, *and neither were the women.*"

"What do you mean, women?"

"Well, I was gonna"

“And you’re fucking giving me doors and tunnels—what’s wrong with you? Tell me about the women.”

The forehead lined with ash blond tufts creases. The only light revealing the coffered ceiling is rhythmic, impermanent.

I should ask the waitress if it’s faux leather. Her answer can be either “I’m gonna check with my boyfriend and get back to you for the weekend,” or anything other than those exact words.

“I found female influence on their, ah, on their lifestyle, mentioned. I don’t know what that influence was exactly. Or much about their lifestyle, to be honest. The weather watching or whatever Aden was concerned with, it dragged on. They were supposed to sit out the disturbances. They kept waiting for something that wasn’t ready. I don’t know what. Garin got restive, I guess, and Corbin, or somebody was supposed to go out on a mission, ah, scouting would make sense, or some sort of intelligence—outing. Aden and Wim stayed behind. Corbin and Garin picked up some, some, some female company. Eric and Erwin, I think they gathered supplies. Vim, I’m not sure yet. This is, I mean, you’re pretty much, you’re caught up.”

“So what about the women, comrade Curly, the women?”

Chuckle. “A total of four new people came back. Two I know were women. The other two, I’m, I’m aware of their existence. Do you not get that I’m still warming up?”

“Good to see you’ve got your priorities straight. The door, the stairs, sundry

utility spaces. You dumbass.”

Slow but deliberate head shake. “I’ve taken a good look at seven, eight pieces, that’s it, out of twenty-four. I’m sure that a lotta the other stuff, you know, from later on, was written before things were lost. Lost to us, in that we no longer have them. So there’s blanks I can’t fill in until I get to that later stuff. Maybe not even then. What I told you about corners.”

A plaintive smile as he reaches for the pseudo ice coffee. Corners? My favorite American football team could use a cornerback.

As I pick up my glass, the decision to voice my thought has been made.

“Delays up to and including derailment could only occur if you had a life.”

“Agreed,” again with a smile.

A trio of hostesses promoting a local cigaret brand is due at our table shortly. A double entendre option will be obvious to any native speaker.

We can’t have something that trite.

“I propose sex is better than music.”

“How did you decide?” Sasha fires back.

“Sex, music and good food. I propose you choose two.”

One is wearing a ring. Two and tied for two?

“Don’t torpedo the hostesses. Don’t turn around. No. No.”

“If the smile’s not meant to be,” the music iterates, “if the heart’s not ready to open.”

The Lament for Shumer and Urim

ending of Canto I

Turmoil descended upon the land.
An unseen, imponderable terror,
Something no one could name,
Spread the contagion of fear and disorder.
Benevolent forces of nature and faith,
Which had been very numerous
And whose power had been very great,
Forsook their shepherdless people.
Loyal households were eradicated,
Their firstborn sons accursed.
The cows, the well fed cows and their young
Were driven from their rangelands,
Made to walk paths they had never known.

A biting wind filled the countryside,
Freshening on its path of destruction.
Townships were razed, houses demolished.
The storm was a curse which none could escape.
The storm was a curse as it came down
Without respite while the earth trembled

And the roaring mountains continued to rage.

Alas, my destroyed city, my home nevermore.

Alas, my destroyed city, my home nevermore.

6 The Shortest Night

Rows of seaweed on a narrow beach. Gusts crumble dry ends, exposing the rotting interiors to the sun.

Driftwood branches stand out like bones against the gray sand. Tidal waves murmur under the warbling plovers. The low cliffs are topped with grasses whose shadows dance down the strand. Now and then a crab scuttles sideways, back below the waterline.

A small company is making its way alongshore. A tall man is striding in front of a young woman on horseback. Horse, rather than woman, appears in charge. She is uncomfortably inexperienced in the saddle, however the pace is slow and she has given up trying not to fall.

Marks of passage vanish at once. Spume-melt fills the hollows. Outlines of hoofprints remain until the next swash. The glistening sand dries in the sun.

A rocky promontory brings the beach to an end. Man makes for an upslope. Animal follows.

Wind is stronger on higher ground. It plays with their hair, their clothes, the horse's mane. The man picks the woman up and sets her down on a boulder with light, effortless movements. Knowing the cue, the mare looks to herself. Red hair flying, gray skin pulls back as teeth reach out for a tussock.

The woman looks at the man, whose attention is elsewhere. She refrains

from staring. The Sun is high up. Hours of journeying surely lie ahead.

Turns to the dazzling water. As unfamiliar as horseback riding, even though they haven't yet left her country. The amazement is all the more engulfing on solid ground. A small figure beside the animal and the man, rooted by the salt air, the souging waves, the beach windrows.

The man is taking stock of the weather and their location. Counting the grains. Looks up at filmy ribbons. North past the inlet. Yellow and brown meadows ramble south, west and as far east as the blue foothills of distant mountains. Groves and shrub dot a serene countryside.

Breathing out, the man looks at the horse, his faithful companion. The mare raises her head—no nod for the continuing of their journey.

Points at a creek chasing them from the south. “Over there, I think.”

The day's silence has been broken. Although they usually stop after sundown, she climbs down and saunters the way he pointed.

A third human traveler's phantom presence can be felt as they set up camp.

A neat little fire defies the wind from its hole. Having unwrapped the blackened mesh and the skewers of meat, he looks near her. She knows what he is going to say.

“Is this a good time?”

She goes through an evanescent jumble.

“Is it too soon?”

Shakes her head and begins.

“They stood watching the Sun, and they were never to be disturbed.

“We were to bring them everything they needed. They rarely needed anything and most of the time, we waited.

“Some of us would wait on the watchers while others would run their errands. It could be a long time before the waiters were called again.

“We were never told why they watched the Sun. They never told us anything much. We learned as children we would be blinded if we so much as glimpsed the Sun. The waiters said their eyes were nearly shut, facing the sky. Then they would turn little by little, opening their eyes and thus summoning us.

“They moved very slowly. They may have found faster movement distasteful. It was avoided around them.

“The rest of us were there for the waiters. We, like they were for the watchers.” She looks down. “Africa means them. The watchers. And that, that is what I can remember.”

The man nods, saying nothing. High praise, as she has come to learn.

A satin lake on a karst plateau. A waxing Moon and a few stars have emerged well before sundown. A lakeshore willow touches the surface. Long leaves float, black on scarlet.

The mare is restless. Flies regroup after her stomping and snorting. The man walks over and untethers her. She turns around on the spot. The flies, preferring

each other's company, stay behind.

The horse was let go so Ekks can focus. The realization takes over from the animal's relief.

The young priestess breathes in dill-scented air. The lake mirrors the brushstrokes of sunglow. Crisp coolness warns of what will happen after dark. Does Vim being dead mean he isn't there? Has death removed him from the reality shared by the survivors, or only his body from their surroundings? Don't his life and death affect their every word?

And most of what they leave unsaid.

A stain spreading over their thoughts and actions.

Questions she must dismiss. She must instead think and speak of days long gone, fading from memory.

She must especially strive to renounce Vim's twin brother, waiting with Corbin's friends at their destination. "One is an inch taller than me," Corbin said, who stands head and shoulders above the tallest men she has ever seen. Five such men. Five.

Most importantly, she must calm her face and demeanor, otherwise Corbin will notice. Has noticed.

Her guide sits down on the other side of the fire, saying nothing.

Everything is changing color.

"They stood watching the Sun and they were never to be disturbed. They spoke to one another without words, they never ate, nor drank, never slept, never

aged, never had children.

“Generations of the same family would attend the same watcher. For years and years they would be loyal. Grandparents, parents and children would grow old and die—not the watcher. The watcher remained.

“Being chosen to wait on the watchers was a unique honor. The rarest thing. Knowing someone who knew someone who knew one attendant was a cause for respect. Such families, where someone knew someone who knew one waiter, were famous. Influential. Likewise within the family, whoever knew the watcher had greater say. They heard it first.

“Watchers would sometimes turn away from the Sun, slowly. Attendants would walk up to them, also very slowly. Where to step and when as they opened their eyes was a skill that had to be learned. They had to practice this for years before being allowed near the watchers. Practicing was supervised by the elderly who could no longer stand watch. After receiving an errand the waiters would withdraw, faster but still very slowly.

“When they were far enough from the watcher, they would do the work assigned to them with all the speed they could. This was never well understood, why the watchers found faster movement distasteful.

“The errand might be a report, or a task. After relaying it, the attendant would return to the same place as before. She or he would bring the report once the errand was done.

“Disobeying the watchers was unthinkable. I have no answer to, what would

happen if, a watcher's will wasn't done. It had to be done. The watchers were responsible. The land was theirs, water and—knowledge, and we had this from them. Like light is from the Sun. No one said *the watchers had nothing to do with it*. No one said *it came from somewhere else*. Or, I never heard that anyone said that."

What else has he been asking about?

"Grass never grew past the watchers' ankles. No birds would fly there. No rain would fall there. No thunder struck. It was never too hot or too cold."

Eyes steady, takes a breath.

"Then something terrible happened. Before I was born, before my parents were born, the watchers and the waiters disappeared. Grass wilted for a day's travel, or two days', where the watchers had been. Whoever went there would get sick.

"Then some said the watchers had been as the lions, and we and others as the antelopes. But that we were now as the lions. Then more people said this, and before I was born everyone said *we are lions*.

"We built the mother lioness in the river bend, you called her the Adobe Madonna. We have the ceremony there on the shortest night of each year. That is, that is what I can remember. And, there are *no* stories about them drinking, and the name, I only, I told you."

Corbin is squeezing his lower lip with thumb and forefinger. She knows he is thinking carefully about what she said.

Her stomach is croaking a prelude to tomorrow's questions.

On a perfect evening he looks at her, saying,

"I told you it was time for my story tonight."

Nods, unsure whether to reply. He turns again, faces up. His body conceals half the twilit sky.

"We were like you in that we were attendants. My people and I, my friends, we were servants too. Shri-e was, our name for ourselves. Unsleping custodians. The night army, as we preferred. Our masters shared a, shall we say connection, that they kept from us. We think they got that from people who preceded them. The Classics. They seem to have known more than our masters. They built the place where I'm taking you. My friend is very curious about—these old names.

"Our masters, you see, they were *good*. Compared to yours. I do think that now. I swear. They weren't such villains as we made them out to be. Yours were strange. Yours, I've never heard anything like that. My questions, I've been trying to link your masters with something, anything, familiar. Strangest of all must be the water.

"Our masters also gazed, I mean they never ate for hunger's sake, but they *drank*. Like we did. They couldn't live without water any more than we can. They would eat these little delicacies at feasts and they would invite us, share

these—juices—I thought the worst of them. Nearly all of them. We spent time seething about how badly off we were, how much we suffered, when we were having the time of our lives.

“Your story has given me a new outlook.”

Corbin relapses into silence. Ekks is getting used to his quirks. Head shielded from his view, thought lands on what is in front of her eyes. Her arms. Studies the two tones of skin and the sides where the one meets the other. Looks at Corbin’s pale skin with its soft light hair.

Knows more is coming when he moves his head a certain way.

“Something terrible happened, like you said. Our masters are gone too, the poor fools. So are my family and my people.” Looks above her shoulder. Closes his eyes. “Our dwelling places were underneath our masters’. My friends and I, the five of us, we were sent on a long journey to the deep north, to find the place left by the Classics. When we found it, we went back.”

Sees him swallow. Reminds herself not to stare.

“We saw mountains coming down. Mountains where, where the cities of our masters had been. Our homes. We watched our country vanish, we watched it change into featureless wasteland.”

A wind of grief is blowing from the sound of his words.

“My friends and I were too far. No one else managed to escape. Two people, that we know of. And, this was not that long ago. I wish it was. Then I could remember less.

“So you see, there is travel time between the two terrible events. Can they be part of the same clash? Can there be some third great power, or is it nature? Did the ground gobble it all up twice? Could something have fallen from the sky twice?”

Questions not meant for her to answer. Corbin’s movement confirms it. Ekks looks at the trees closing in on their camp. Spruces stand out among lindens, dogwoods and others unknown to her. A bevy of crawlers, fliers, burrowers. Hawks and magpies are cruising above a long valley beneath stripes the color of ripe plums. The hills form a solid ridge in the north. They are only passing the glen’s southern outskirts.

Corbin stokes the fire, looks again at the green and russet fields. The gliding birds. A dozen soaring queens of a borderless realm. Where does the world end for one like Corbin? What is the ambit of his power, where could he fail to take her?

And Vim, the boy, she misses, who was four and a half years younger than her. Another boy, *Vim’s duplicate*, is waiting. Maybe gentle like Vim. Unlike Corbin. The opposite of Corbin.

And it’s cold, and getting colder.

Shivering, she reminds herself not to show any of it. To Corbin she is probably a hopeless rustic.

Should she be thinking of questions for him? One? More if he likes it.

He can’t expect her to remember all that.

It dawns on Ekks that Corbin has made an important discovery. *We were having the time of our lives*, he said. On the subject of tremendous loss and regret.

Wonders what his age might be, not for the first time. How eventful his life would have been, compared to her pampering. These weeks spent walking are a game to him. An exercise demanding enough to present a challenge. An extended stroll.

Looks at his chin, his neck. Seems lost in thought. Sheltering her as though she were in the lee of some rock face. From wind-strewn sand, and spindrift before.

If only he was less sullen. More open, like today.

Or half as gentle as Vim.

The ache feathers her down a fluffy chute to an irresistible white-out.

“We passed this old couple with a camel. They told us the grotto was ‘certainly not far.’ That we should look for airways. Found one, heard voices, slid down.”

“Into a grotto full of naked women.” Aden’s tone points to an appreciable credibility gap.

“Not naked,” Corbin insists. “I never said naked.”

Eric’s breath doubles as a sigh. He gives Aden half a look while nodding for

Corbin to continue.

“Vim almost bumped into her. Others backed away when they heard us, more so when they saw us. Not her. From the looks of things she’d been having some kind of special treatment. I thought they were training for their festival. Preparing her for some major role. ‘Our place in the north?’ ‘Let’s go.’ That’s it. It stood to reason she’d know about old Africa. I wish I could tell you about, or more about, the drinking.”

Corbin’s three listeners have been affected by his report on sungazers.

“Anybody feel like telling me where Senior is?”

Aden and Erwin agree with a look it has to be Eric.

“Comforting Nissa.” Toneless as usual. “His love interest.”

“You’re telling me the beauty seeker’s invested with a, with a, chance-met stranger.”

“Possibly.”

“What caused her discomfort?”

“Brother’s death.”

“The little brother killed him according to Garin,” Erwin slips in. Aden looks at him, but manages only a scowl of contempt. Erwin follows up with “Fraternal fratricide.”

When Corbin grins, Aden turns on him again. “Why didn’t you ask her about the air, I told you to”

“I did. I forgot. She couldn’t think of anything being said or felt about the

air. Carrying the disease, you should, they understood so little.” Turns to Eric.

“The wisdom lover is the fratricide.”

“Wevvei, the brother, or Ev, was half dead when Garin brought him. More than half. Lost most of his blood. Aden did what he could. She sleeps in the big room sometimes, in the bed that used to be his. She’s asked me to switch with her a few times. You haven’t told us how Vim died.”

None observe the significance of Corbin withholding this important detail until a direct question. Cracks are undeniably there. Words are rigorously sifted, events left out. A sea change.

“He, I told him he had to wait. I, told him I’d go back for him. He wouldn’t wait. It was a pass. Not an easy climb by any means. Not easy for *me*. There was nowhere else, though. A long long way around the mountains. More exposed, and, he tried on his own, and, nothing, there was nothing, it was too late.”

Knowing Corbin even better than his brother, Eric picks up on the changed manner of speaking, the broken clauses, the indecision. Excusable, as it was a sad event, and Corry must have partly blamed himself. Probably still does.

It never occurs to Eric his best friend is lying.

Enemies and danger are no less threatening if they are imagined.

Eric has regained his balance when Corbin asks, “What’s the girlfriend like?” He is on the point of saying “Why not find out on your own” when Erwin the perennial bachelor beats him to it.

“She’s only got the Moon and stars on your minxy umber shaman.”

7 Defaulting

“Tell me I misunderstood. Tell me we’re not supposed to wear them the whole time.”

“For one day.” Aden steeples his hands. “And one night. In a pouch or something around your necks. The closer to your skin, the better.”

“Trust the little sticks,” Corbin tells the space between Aden and Eric. “Not self testing.”

Erwin grins as Aden is looking for words among dust and shadows. “A lack of confidence in the Classics, who could surely never fail us.”

“I meant, I thought this would be a social gathering, having noted the absentees.”

“Self testing would tell you too late.” Erwin’s cadence is a sneering song. The brothers are playing the same game, with the younger in the lead.

If Corbin learned anything from the General, it was to not give up. “I feel no pinpricks. The little stick can tell me nothing.”

“Reframing,” Garin puts in.

“It can tell you whether you *need* to look for pinpricks.” Four open mouths cause Eric to add, “A day and a night, hardly an issue.”

Corbin manages a self-deprecating smirk. “Theirs are opaque. Ours are transparent.” The others watch him slouch. Is that him conceding?

Garin clears his throat before Aden can continue. “I don’t like what we’re turning into.”

“I too dislike the passing of time,” Erwin tries again.

“It seems to me we’re free,” Garin presses on as though nothing happened. “It seems to me we can do whatever we want. The only authority is our conscience. This talk of what we should be doing, and why, what not, why not. Convincing—ourselves?”

They sway until Eric cuts through. “We should be looking for faultlines in Aden’s reasoning.” Corbin’s movement announces a rejoinder waiting to happen. “Impossible before hearing him out.”

Aden waits for the eyes. “It’s like this.” The dusty floor again. “You live by the sea. You fish.”

“No.” Garin, of course.

“It’s easy like this.”

“Needs to be wolves,” Erwin proclaims. “Or tigers. Sharks. That fits too. Peasants found claws, skulls with teeth, how not to give them flight? How not to imagine?” His dragon theory. No takers. “So wolves.” Nods with pretend authority. “Wolves.”

After a quiet interlude Aden says, “Wolves it is.” Eyes gleam all around. “You rule the badlands.” His brother suppresses a snicker. “You wish to tame the boars which you hunt. You want them plump, docile. You need to explain this, you need to build a bridge to them.

“Why go through with the hunt, my friends? you ask them. The briars, the waters to cross. The neverending fear. Lay down your lives freely.

“Are there none who wish to end their existence? Some have given up hope of fulfillment or redemption. Let them come to me. I will feed on some of you one way or another. Not all of you can escape all of the time. Let those who wish to give up their lives do so.”

Aden’s eyes are on the floor. No one interrupts.

“The wolf tames the boars. Exertion, stress, gone. The boars have freedom and purpose. The ones that would have raised a trotter against themselves have proof of aiding the greater good. You eat the disheartened ones. That being so is a gain for the pigs. Isn’t it? You’ve ceased to hunt and kill indiscriminately. They can move past living in fear.” Reaches for a cup of ice water, holds it in the air.

“What method do they opt for?” Garin supposedly wants to know. Corbin holds breath to better hear the answer.

“Up to seven in every twelve choose to die as you want them to. They submit to you. To your better judgment.” Puts the cup down. “What you want, how you want them to die, isn’t the same in every case. It’s good with the wolves. I like it.” Although he is talking more about pigs. Goes for water a second time, again changes his mind.

“Up to seven in every twelve. In the main you go with what *they* want.” An ephemeral frown. “For this or that reason. You eat them after suffocating them in their sleep, or whatever it is they want, the suicides.”

Corbin, a past master of ennui, is engaged along with the others. No one has a clue what Aden is talking about. He is supposed to be explaining the difficulties in ascertaining the likelihood of their survival.

“The boars go along. You release the tame ones, cull the wild ones. You do this for years and years. A boar, a ferocious beast, is now a cutesy little pig for her to hold in one hand. A present.

“She’s delighted.” Looking at his brother well after having answered. All eyes on him. Eyes on you when you want it is the rule of polite conversation.

“She remembers the work you put in. It used to alienate her. She sees its worth, feels grateful for your wisdom.”

Subdued expression. In another time one might have called it showing his hand.

“You avoid accidents, age and eventually die. The world carries on without you. You’re the memory of what you meant to others.

“Thus, it may not be a bad idea to think about that beforehand. About what might happen if you keep doing what you’re already doing. *Then* you do what needs to be done.” Takes that drink and swallows. “You do your duty.”

Nods, seemingly finished. Garin is happy to supply further questions. “How do you justify what ‘needs’ to be done? How do you quell dissent?”

“You know what your conscience is telling you.”

“My conscience tells me to look for beauty. I need more to follow your advice.”

“Look deeper into your conscience. You have that freedom of choice.”

“Quite disfluent, dear brother.”

“Fluency,” Aden’s eyes travel from nowhere to nowhere, “is fringe discourse.”

“Fluency is paramount.”

“I remain leery.”

“You go on doing that while your pigs develop a suicide cult.”

“Seven out of twelve,” Eric reminds them, face held tight as always. “Go on.”

The younger Janson recovers without missing a beat. “Four of the five are old. They wish to sit out what little remains. Their one desire is to reflect on the transition. That works for you. Aged meat is flavorful.”

The sideswipe causes Garin to react, however he decides he will not be provoked.

“The last twelfth change their minds. They wish to live after all. These you release.”

The elder Janson remains unmoved. “The domicile pigs have *freedom* and purpose despite never leaving the farm.”

“He provides,” Eric replies. “No incentive for them to strike out.”

Garin’s eyes lose focus. The other four wait.

“I forget what any of this has to do with the sticks. The pigs are the sticks and we’re the wolves. No, we’re the pigs. Or, wait, wolves are sticks and, pigs

are the disease.”

Corbin’s shoulder’s move. “I thought animals represented points of view.”

A grinning Erwin enunciates “Numbers. But tones first.”

“What?”

“What?”

Heads turning.

“We had tones before words,” Erwin again. “The snag is the whole being above attribution.”

“Numbers, yes. Probabilities. I tried to use that story to, uh, resolve both questions. The other thing you said, you never believe anyone’s objective.”

The younger Mananson is seldom unprepared. “I do believe in the reason paradox.”

Eric’s frown is slight but unambiguous. “What ‘both’ questions, and why pigs?”

“Because he said wolves,” Aden nods toward Erwin. “The two questions are the disease and defaulting. Disease—death—tissue—our tissue has changed. Due to our exposure. We came on time, everybody got back on time, the damage is contained. That means nothing. There can be no healing. The only hope is to die of old age before the disease kills us. You may feel pinpricks in fifty years. If we test using the wands, we know in a day or two. That’s where I was headed before being ambushed with question marks.”

Uncertainty in their eyes. The different pronouns, ‘may,’ ‘if,’ ‘question

marks.' Careless. Sloppy.

Clasping the tabletop. "I thought you'd wish to know. I thought you'd be happy I found the wands and how to use them. I thought this went without saying." Looking up at big brother again.

"Disfluent. Wishing, planning, expecting. Think it through."

"You're being stupid," Aden barks out.

"Can we test the water with the little sticks?" Eric asks him. "The brine, the fruit?"

"I've been doing it."

"When things are back to normal, we go out, camping, recon." Eric nods. "Hopefully it won't take that long."

Corbin looks at the center of the table. "You're saying we've got half a year's worth of food. No risk involved."

A repeat nod. "I think so."

"I may be no wandmaster," Garin grants, "half a year seems a stretch for the young couple."

Corbin feels threatened. "Gives you time to think, having the big bed to yourself."

"How's life in the singles room, Captain Corry?"

They ceased to pay attention to the old lamps but now one blinks three times.

"The triple blip, infamy," Erwin comments.

“The triple blip,” Aden concurs, tolerance coupled with utter disinterest. Looks at each of his friends, turning his head slower than he might have. “Are we there yet?”

Eyes gather on Garin.

“When do we leave?”

“When a mission is found,” Eric answers. “Exacting, worthwhile, ideally both.”

“How will that be judged?”

“Sewers, handicraft, writing, metals,” Eric recites. “There must be something somewhere.”

“Then what?”

“We help spread kindness.”

Garin’s head moves in a show of disdain. “The wisdom lover has allayed your concerns. His strategy hinges on the sticks and their colors. He hopes to die of old age. Well thought out indeed. You three incline to comply.”

Silence in the war room.

The hatch opens as the third knock is resounding.

“Come on in.”

She climbs inside. He lets the blue light in for her. A courtesy.

She looks at the arrangement he has made. “Wim.” Her smile is all mouth.

He is not understanding.

“Priestess.” He thinks he is.

Garin rubs his eyes. It spreads to Corbin who saw it first. The others smile.

“What else did you say?” Garin asks through his hands. Lowers them to look at his brother. “The other issue.”

Aden licks his lips. “Defaulting.”

Ekks tries to rest her head on an elbow. When it sinks into the blankets, she has to turn around.

Spread out blankets are stacked on top of collapsed tents. They have two small pillows. He made a bed. Wim made a bed for the two of them. He will break it all up later, tucking away the blankets, folding back the tents, making sure the warehouse looks the same as before. He will do this while she walks back, in what passes for daylight, alone.

No family, no friends, no brother. These dark mornings are his life.

She tries to pivot on her elbow again. It works because they are closer, her arm resting against his shoulder.

Their breathing is slowing down.

“Wim, listen to me.”

She knows how much she will miss his gentleness as he is turning, also that it changes nothing. The simple ineluctable truth is that desire has no bearing on our duties. Garin's brother may be on to something after all.

"Defaulting includes peacetime," Garin sounds displeased. "Say, twin linking, or meditation."

Aden looks unperturbed. "Those and others. We can't be hung on this."

"Can't be *seen* hung on this."

They chew on Erwin's input, moving him up on the informal scoreboard.

"On this," Garin agrees to disagree. Seems disappointed by having nothing better.

Aden has prepared a fresh pitch. "Defaulting is"

"Wait, wait." Eyes on Eric. "Peacetime takes us too far. A non-critical point we can flesh out later. Twin linking, for example, training up another pair. Why would we do that?"

No one is backing Aden. Eric continues. "I suggest going over known cases of real defaulting. And suspected real defaulting. Weapons, tactics, what else, contexts, decision making. The two arguments."

"You're saying, *let's listen to Junior now.*" Corbin nods toward his brother. "Who could know this but him? How can we have opinions about this? Who wants to make these claims? Who can base them on anything? We should do

what they did, we should do the opposite? Defaulting? Please.

“No real defaulting, peacetime defaulting we can discuss later. Leave it at that?” Nodding an answer to his question. “Leave it at that.”

Errors like straws upon the surface flow;

He who would search for pearls must dive below.

John Dryden

8 Deeper

My senses reply, undeterred:

“What makes you certain your trust in the givens of Reason is an improvement on your prior confidence in the givens of the Senses? Had you not sworn by us until Judge Reason brought home our unreliability? Had that never occurred, you would still hold us true. Likewise, a third Judge may be found outside of Reason. Upon making an appearance, that Judge may annul the attainments of Reason precisely as Judge Reason overruled the Senses. This is not disproved by being unobserved.”

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali

Is that his tongue on his palate? Are his eyes open? Is he awake, alive? Or is this a dream of being more than a memory?

The nastiness in his mouth is real. As though a furry animal crawled in there to die. The windowless room is insubstantial, but eyelids glide down, up, down, up. Toes feel the blanket. Back in his body, no doubt.

The hoping man steels himself for an early rising. Shreds of unremembered dreams are mercurial, fluttering mites.

May have convinced himself to perform two tasks if he wakes up first. This

means rousing himself, getting up, meeting objectives. Honoring commitments.
Resuming yesterday's metamorphosis into the best possible person.

Tries different angles. Looks at nothingness. Looks back.

I embraced this duty.

A breakneck chase as his body lies still.

Forebodings stemmed, stretches arms and legs, slowly sits up.

The round room whittles the night away. The contours of his bed, the door.
The world as a living machine.

The wisdom lover rises in the gloom, yearning for a good spit.

Outside the washrooms, the almost-light shows the rooms and hallways he
has traversed countless times. Yet conviction hasn't brought ease. Each step
remains a struggle, like battling a headwind.

The uncertainty demon rears up. *One Task, food, rest, maybe a Second.*

Light changes again as he enters the washrooms. Shadows grow only to
collapse behind him. A metal sink is to his left. An oval mirror is affixed to the
wall above a small shelf. All is uncomfortably low and he must stoop to wash his
mouth.

Picking up a rounded glass wand, one of many lined up on the shelf, swabs
the inside of his cheek. Takes a good look in the mirror, the piece of glass in his
left hand.

The mirror offers no hints as to what might have caused his malaise. How
much can the eyes truly see, though?

Holds them shut, the better to choose which path to take.

Refreshed and for once at peace with himself, a bubbling assurance suggests the hoper may have a Third Task in him today.

Soft light flits over the ceiling as he crosses the atrium to the washrooms. Glass wand in hand, accosts the mirror. He has gotten used to the long hair and the bristly beard with its brown streaks. That will have to go before he sets foot outside.

The wands have been clear for days. His body is ageing no faster than it always has. He is pulling through. All of them are pulling through.

Not the young couple.

Mutters “Poisoned love” looking at the long room door.

Too loud. The others will be waking up soon.

A bath. His Third Task will be a bath.

Atrium, curtain, straight instead of the usual left turn. Plugs the bath and begins filling it up. Standing up, notes the multitude of soaps, sponges and similar items. Can Erwin foraging account for it?

Translucent jars of grainy crystalline stuffs, dusky puce, teal, mulberry red.

Opens one. Ground up minerals? For rubbing, perhaps.

The colorful jars seem too much even for the celibate supply master, given how little time he had.

The colors are in random order. The cryptic thinker would have sorted them.

Tongues of steam coil upward.

Nissa had been buying provisions for her unexpectedly lavish wedding. The priestess, too, was having a ceremonial bath in that grotto when Corry and Vim barged in. In Corry's telling, anyway. Anyone could have brought the jars.

Sprinkles a pinch of the red grains over the bath. A pungent flowery aroma bursts from the water, inundating the small room.

Steps into the bath with a smirk asking what next.

Head in perfumed steam, the wisdom lover lets his eyelashes sink.

What are shapes and sounds unlike to those known before? What is our name if no one is there to call us? His name means his father's hope. What does that mean?

His father died when he was very young, with the fathers of his friends. Four heroes self-sacrificed. His mother would know what his father's hopes had been. Somehow he had never asked.

Not for want of thinking about it.

His mother is in the kitchenette, ten feet away. Making him a second acorn butter roll despite a repeated "One, please." A finished roll is on the plate, and yet she is spreading the butter, rolling up the bread. He did manage to turn down savory mulligan. Her hope appears to be a chubby younger son.

Little can be seen past the mounds of assorted family possessions. Recognizes hand-me-downs outgrown a decade ago. Mazy pathways weave around ceiling high piles. The kitchenette counter is full of condiments and spices pilfered from the masters' tables. Many containers hang over on either side. The demeaning injustice. The clutter. The connection. The arbitrary scarcity.

Here she comes with *three* rolls on a plate, a cup of milk in the other hand.

"Three, mother." Jovial mock-exasperation.

"Look how small they are."

Only a fool asks the rain to stop.

Bites into a roll. Acorn butter has always been his favorite, but the bread is astounding. Warm, moist, the crust melting as he chews. It makes him smile. His mother is a mistress cook.

"I'm only here to say goodbye."

"I know."

Bite, swallow, sip. Must not leave without asking her.

"I have a question about father. May I?"

She allows it.

"What was his hope for me?" Picks up a second roll.

"His hope. Your name." Her voice is dripping from a distant recess. A crevasse. "His hope was the same as for your brother. That you're a joy to the world, and the world to you. In spite of suffering and destruction."

He must swallow.

“That could be any parent’s hope. Did father harbor a hope, not for the both of us, for *me*?”

She thinks back. A solitary roll is on the plate. “The last is with royal jelly. Your brother was old enough to ask, to ask more serious questions. You were too young. Garin, he set a great deal of store by the eyes, the hands. By the opinions of others. Your father and I thought he should read and think more. More than, to find what appeals to him. We encouraged him to question everything, to question his questions. To venture outside. He was bigger than us in this regard.”

Eyes meet. He nods. Royal jelly is a rare luxury.

“His hope for you would’ve been to try and look, perhaps deeper. Why not, to set an example for your brother. For everyone.”

He forgot to breathe while she was speaking. As he exhales, his mother touches his cheek.

“If that was his hope, you *have* justified it. You *are* an exemplar. The General praises you no less than Tia and Eric. His eyes shine when you’re mentioned. The third place, is that, are you—are you still—”

“No.”

Knowing what that means is a searing pain behind the eyes. Knowing what he must do.

“Mother, come with us.”

“Where?”

Another deep breath. Left hand on the table, poised between empty plate and cup. The choices are to say it or perish.

“Away north. Far from Shandhaala. On our mission.”

A mystifying sad smile. “What, ride a horse? At your pace? In open air, in sunlight?”

“I’ll never see you again, otherwise. Nor will Garin. You were born in the sun. I can see it.”

“Born—and half your age when they took me.” The new sad smile. “You said the mission would last for months. My son, I’m not *that* old, you know. The city will be here when you return. Quinces will be in season. Young wine. Pears, chestnuts. New lemons.”

He must have brooded on that for so long he forgot the farewells, his ascent through the suburbs.

Why hadn’t he tried harder?

A part of it must have been indignation at sharing the blame.

Gathered at their compound inside the lower city walls. Eric is expounding on goals, but they are set for a long ride and his thoughts wander off. Recalls the boy Eric’s excitement regarding Corbin’s mom’s ways. And Tia’s mom’s, and Erwin’s. “She *scoops* egg yolks out of the bowl,” skinny arm dipping, rising, “you know, she doesn’t catch them with the shell. And the way she folds shirts.”

Standing on this very spot, holding the reins of ponies, each thinking that Eric was the only true orphan among them, wondering what it meant. Would

Maris' relatives adopt him? Would the General?

They have strong arms these days, and fine horses. Is that an answer?

Around and above looms the realm of their masters, Shandhaala the Place of Calm. Through boots and socks, soles pick up the evening quavers of Azgarta the Undercity. Anguished thralls living underground cry out. His mother among her heaps of useless things and her stolen treats. Thousands of others waiting to die, feeling not the least desire to cast off their shackles. Wretches so miserable they look up to the six of them.

"We should be on the lookout for—" Eric is about to finish. They remain standing when he does. Nobody moves or asks anything, unprecedented, no questions? The stale yard air is menacing, how can that be, this favorite place?

The hoping man feels an urge to speak. "We should bring back some sugar for my mom."

Stars shine through pairs of chinks. Garin is a little taller, Erwin a little shorter, Eric and Corbin of a height, their eyes aligned. Windows have been slammed shut so that nothing can be read.

"Your mom is dead," Corbin's voice is a smoky unlight. "Everyone's moms."

Of course, what was he thinking? The war room here at the Underground Palace, what compound, what horses, was that a dream? How could it be? Rounded, hunger slaking acorn butter is on his tongue, and his mother, she was just there, he tried to tell her, "Mom? Mom? MOM?"

Addressing an unknowable swirly gloaming. Starlight has been extinguished. Stern unreadable faces, parents, friends, brother, gone. He is on his own.

The hoping man opens his eyes.

Air feels clammy on freshly shaven cheeks. He moves forward cautiously through full darkness. Climbs the stairs, takes a turn, walks down the tunnel.

The only unlit area without sconces.

The makers of the astra, their intentions, the great enigma.

His best guess is a family bunker. The Facilities must have been meant for a private library. The bedroom and washroom layout is consistent. But it was never used, it was left unfinished. With no construction tools or materials lying around. Nothing at all left by the builders.

No family records, no hint of any person or event.

None of these are new questions. Turns to the task at hand: opening the door. Go back and shave his head?

No. That was a good decision. The threat of vermin is inconsiderable compared to feeling like a servant again.

Another long bath when he gets back. With the colored smells.

Shoulders the stone door open.

Sunlight and warmth call for adjustment. How strange it was that first time,

seeing the door open. Svee's crouching stance, knife in hand. The cut, made without so much as a wince or a sound. Each trying to hide his respect for her composure. Staring into that circle with expectations spilling from their chests. Buffoons waiting in front of the empty warehouse, ignorant of the door fifty feet away.

What she must have thought of them.

Chirruping from outside.

Their childhood and Svee's silly plot, using Herry to kill her mother.

To kill her mother.

Does he smile or cringe?

The hillside is a profusion of purple irises, with other growth in scattered clusters. Farther afield a few rocky hills break the undulating overstory. Landing on his sleeve, a damselfly folds her legs in supplication. He shakes her off. The Sun is low, as ever in the north, but bright and steady.

Starts down the hill, turns left. Cover is sparse on the north slope. Clouds are gray below, blue in the middle, white above. The ocean is a mile away, shadows?

Still pointing leftward.

Heads for the path.

A squirrel scurries up a juniper tree before turning around. He meets her eyes.

The two of us. Aden and the squirrel. To let her come to harm.

“No.”

Downy puffs are moving with him. Starts paying attention to where he sets his feet. Goes up through his legs to the center of weight. Freer than a fish or a bird, he could travel anywhere and do anything if his friends weren't counting on him. His sense of responsibility could hardly be stronger if they were sidestepping forest obstacles beside him.

Breathing out, breathing in awareness of it. A whiff of salt, a rumble more felt than heard.

Nearing the shoreline cliffs.

Ocean, sky. Two eternal blues. One can be touched, not the other. Important somehow.

One couldn't be blue without the other.

No one can be anything without others.

A stirring idea is shaping up. A final push is needed. Sky, ocean, what else?

His dream. The disturbing dream of his mother, those last words between them. Something in that dream, asked her a second question, what was it?

Stops in his tracks. His mother was alive in the dream. His father was dead.

A billow is glittering through the thinning trees. Walks on. Flag trees, legs, the squirrel. Friends, parents, spouses. Living creatures, things, ideas. Self and others, give and receive. Spinning, dancing. Earth circling the Sun. The Sun circling the axis of the galaxy. Galaxies circling the hub of the world. The long slow dance with intricate steps. Why is it all important? Why any of it?

All of it, any of it.

Trees are behind. The blues open up. A grassy slope leads to the edge. The song of wind and ocean is majestic, truer than his name, more himself than his body.

Shouts out “I am endless. I am all.” The old formula outflies wishing and regret until excess draws back to reveal the supreme emanation of strangeness, the falling apart and the joining together.

Sees a way forward.

Whispers “Someone to be with. A woman.”

9 Pies and Salmon

A roebuck raises his head from the water, sensing a weather change. Ripples spread around droplets falling from his muzzle as he turns left, right. Stars are etched into the pond. Up. The buck regrets his mate isn't there to partake in the tenuous marvel.

Or is it a weather change?

Breaths melt. No wind brings the news, though an unfamiliar sound does suggest something is approaching. A player has joined the rhythm game. It has nothing to do with the pall of cloud above those hills. Thready yet unmistakable, a padding making dry leaves crackle.

The pattern's newness is no less disturbing than the walker's inherent size and power. The pull of exploration is strong despite the danger. The starfield is effusing filaments of ethereal music—but his family needs his protection.

The antlered head is bowed low, weighed down by the certainty of not witnessing a unique event. With a last drink of cool water, as though saying goodbye, the buck walks away from the trysting-place. Within moments he has vanished among the trees.

The night is so threateningly watchful that Li wants to turn back. The rimy

undersides of branches are all in rapport. *Go home*. Each little voice adds to the distraction. She makes a stop at each stone and each root. Hasn't yet walked a mile although she set off soon after supper. Why so obstinate?

She is done holding back. Everyone holds back, everyone lies and pretends, and she is done with this. Done. Come what may, she will know the truth.

Puts her foot down. Takes another step.

She will not stay under the trees. She will walk down the green. She will touch the water.

Saying the words in private is a different proposition from rushing head-on to meet a greater power. The clearing is sacred but pond water is the hallow. Or so everyone believes.

Brave, strong.

Insistent doubt is making it silly to think those words let alone say them. Empty vanity. Lying even to themselves.

A breath of fresh air. More than halfway there. Is the not-breeze carrying a suggestion of a scent? Musky, old and young in one, both sour and sapid—could this be Our Lady?

Freezes midstep, foot suspended above a rock.

Back in his family lair, the sleepless roebuck averts his eyes from the little ones' delightful frolics. Shudders at the thought of what he dared not face. How

not to fear that unrushed gait?

The stars as his last gulp went down, lapping wavelets, luminous dust, a spirit basking in ecstasy.

Neck cradled in his sleeping mate's haunches.

Trees around their home are growing.

No threats.

Nestles back into reverie.

Li plants her foot. This is some forest creature. A night flower. Not Our Lady.

Bent double with apprehension.

To turn back, slip under the covers, live out her days.

The scent belongs elsewhere, to a moving body. A hungry, consuming life, a whirlwind rather than the little clearing.

Moonlight on the grass.

Nearly there.

The novel scent is subtly stronger.

Waits under the trees, overawed.

How did it begin? Where did it all go wrong?

They were talking about death, riding north.

“How we used to meet on the stairs,” who said that, Corry? May not have been the same conversation.

Having dozed off, now fully awake. The clever animal senses this without him touching the reins. Her walk quickens. The grass bowl around the pond ahead looks very small in the moonlight, no more than half a mile across. The importance of the place had engorged it in his expectations, leaving him disappointed.

Bobs in the saddle. Wonders whether his brother or any of their friends would observe that trifling setback. Wishes for someone to ask. Racing ahead, questions his trip’s advisability. This entails misgivings about the choices he continues to make on behalf of the entire group. Travel plans deployed after careful consideration are abruptly dismantled.

Once again finds himself envying, in addition to pitying, the others’ convictions. At times he can see past the questions, and yet their simplistic action seeking is unsatisfactory. The recklessness, the levity.

If only he could achieve a common front with the thinker.

Catching sight of starlit grass, taps the mare on the neck and dismounts. A mouthful of ice water to clear his thoughts, exhaling suspicions. The call is undeniable. This is the place. A prize is waiting for him here. Night after night he felt the pull as he slept. Fighting a tingling boredom with the food he has brought, thinks about ducks.

He is the whirlwind. The scent is his. She expected it to be tangier this close, to blot out commonplace sensations. Her nostrils spread with admiration.

Almost went home without speaking to him. His huge animal is near as impressive.

Whispers her names to an alder tree she is hugging. Deft fingers move down the ridges. Rough bark against her fingertips. Tiptoe on a gnarly root.

Knows why he is here, though he may not. Why he needs her. Having come down on it, she lacks the courage to act.

He, too, is waiting. Aden Janson's patience is inexhaustible. Contemplating interrelatedness, commonalities, ratios, whether a person's life span is any measure.

Hair yellow and brown, like hers. Eyes round to her almond. Tremendously tall, though. And very well dressed. Thinking of his clothes, supple leather like a second skin, steps forward, a butterfly from a chrysalis, a young lady of beauty and charisma.

Seeing her is like hearing a laughter. Deep laughter originating behind the sky, clear of any boundary.

He had learned the language on the way there, but had not thought of what to say.

“My name is Aden. It means hoping.”

“My name is Oa-li. Li.”

“Does your family have a place where they store food? Outside where they sleep.”

Nods. “The shed.”

“Is there any fish, or meat?”

“Salmon. We have smoked salmon.”

“How many? Is it the fish in one piece, or...” Fingers, one two three four.

“No.” Traces an oblong shape in the air. “Tail cuts with the bone removed. Two dozen. Grandmothers call it a four score.”

“How about something sweet for later?”

“Pies.”

“What kind?”

“Apple and blueberry and honey. All in one.”

“What...” Her nose, her shoulders. “What sort of honey?”

“Heather.”

“Excellent. Could you bring six pieces of salmon and two pies? Then you can ride.” Points. “She knows what to do. Does that sound too heavy?”

A heartbeat. “No. Where are we going?”

“I can tell you on the way. How long do you think it might take?”

“To go there and back, an hour. Maybe more.”

“Good. I can wait here.”

So impelling was that heartbeat, so much at stake, so certain the prospect

only half the feeling was hers, that she turns and goes without question.

He thinks about the games while she is gone. The rationalizations for the various grudges.

Later, she recalls never having asked about his age. Did she tell herself to do that on the way home, or back?

“Two women, five men,” he told her. “For now.”

Before she can make up her mind, forceful aromas of salmon and maplewood smoke lull her to sleep.

Proud of her contribution to the long mission, the mare paces sedately alongside her pensive master, never losing her footing as the night nears dawn.

Once having created needs, one naturally fulfills them.

C. S. Lewis

10 Camping

Scud clouds above a forest glade. Springtime gossamer sparkles in the north though the hour is near noon.

The priestess is watching a pair of shadows shorten. They are aimed at a shallow squarish hole. A trilling blackbird gives the scene a passing thought. A hen, thus a peeress, a sister. Like the oaf girl by her side.

The oaf girl is tall. Her shadow is longer. And she is afraid things will run out. The oaf girl constantly frets about using things up, about not having enough. Not just for clothes.

The priestess is in control of her body despite the pain. Her plaits commence the movement.

Her ocean of self-pity shrunk by a drop when she thought of Nissa's silent support.

"Ekksro means bluebell."

"That's very pretty!"

Unruly shoots of nut bushes are filling out.

Something about the nerd girl? Something about her body. Nothing too bad.

"You have to admit the tomboy is smart. Even though she talks through her boyfriend."

A shared grim laugh. The pale girl opens her mouth.

“A good match. Waif and Serious.”

The priestess cuts her laughter short so as not to provoke the harrowing wet cough.

“Edemnissa means she is graceful.”

Ekks touches Nissa’s arm. Shadows copy them on the ground. “It’s good on you.”

Sunlight dapples pines and firs. A whiffle stirs the scrub. Below their feet a mole swerves to avoid an anthill. Chances on wild onions.

“Thank you. Thank you for being here with me.” As Ekks lowers her arm, shadows realign. Pinpricks torment her inside and out.

“Wevvei means he can help.”

Twigs break and mud splatters as four men carry a bed with a dead boy in it. Dead because of Ekks. Not the same, never the same as the only boy she really liked. The sweet trusting boy who took her hand, who understood. Who also died because of her. In a way.

Sitting on a dune by the Dazee, waiting for Corbin to tell her Vim had drowned.

The wall of blame she built that day is breaking. Some of what happened was her fault.

Thinks back on her mother, as when they met, when Vim invited her to come. Before she asked him where, before she could have known anything about a twin.

It seemed then it had been long ago, many years, the last talk with her mother, in her birth home.

Her mother was going away to the temple. She would enter the cave and be released.

“Will I go to the temple, Mommy?”

“Always remember,” her mother had said, “bring everything you want within, and everything is everyone.”

The shoal of clouds above her head. The goodness in her hazel eyes, her dimples, the shape of her mouth. The young daughter sitting on her knee.

The Underground Palace makes her people hopeless indigents. Nonetheless she misses Sagaar very much. Vim she misses more, and his brother too, who needed her, whom she used to death. Whom they will burn before burning his bed.

Feels no regret over choosing Vim, Corbin and adventure. Although—that has brought her the pyre, the jabs, the memories. The implacable cold. The poisoned love they needed too badly.

Trying hard not to cough under attack. Nowhere to hide.

The two shadows pointing at the funeral site.

Home, the unfriendly sun, the girls and women knowing what to do. Twins with their rumors and their secrets. Grasslands meeting the sky.

The sun is wan and lukewarm. The north sea hums at the hearing limits. Ekks’ eyes find Nissa’s. The oaf girl’s braid is shining in the sun, the most

glorious thing in the world. Her gorgeousness is unreal. What symbols could describe it?

“And you never knew him,” Nissa says very softly.

Ekks is lost for a moment. Garin has confirmed the brother was no less striking. “You mean...”

“You helped me when we met. When he died. You never even knew him. I thought you were so strong. I wanted to be like that. And, how they look down on us. We are stupid children to them. To Li as well. And he helps her. When she doesn’t have the word. You know. We. She. We—we are—”

Connecting eyes reinforce Nissa’s words.

We. We are.

The magic of the sound. Kindness and affection. What pinpricks? The last tears have slid down.

Arms extend. Hands find one another. Fingers enter grooves and give ten tiny hugs.

They share something more with each breath.

Nissa understands the long wait for engagement. Her prospects in the village without a name. That tree where they were resting when Garin ran down the path. How certain she had been they would die. Five necks stretching at Garin’s shout. And the boy Wim, how sorry the priestess must be. What symbols could describe it?

“Sleep in the guest bed tonight. Just us girls from before.”

A wedge of crossbills above the trees. Looking without seeing, Ekks turns and touches Nissa's arm. "Who am I?" she replies. "What is now? What is forever?"

A freshet breaks up a stubborn patch of rotten ice. Water tumbles down a hummock, spraying the bankside turf. Rainbows form, shift and dissipate. Midges converge, mesmerized by the colors: what the spiders have been waiting for.

The runnel broadens at the knoll's foot. On level ground, oaks and birches dwarf the brushwood. Sun and Moon trade places.

Headwaters merge in the flatlands. A swift river runs past abandoned campsites in verdant meadows. Rain washes the scorch marks off stones. Lingering smoke columns elude all but the most attentive observers. The trampled places, left by throes of passion in the night.

Lilies wiggle in the breeze. Mandrake grows loudly from rich earth.

Air is thick with pollen. A bullfinch sneezes atop a swaying reed. Tries to shake the stuff off his wings, wipe it on the reed-frond, both in vain. Alighting on floatage, bravely dips into the current. With much toil reaches a broken branch above the surface. Holding on with beak and claw, slowly rescues himself. A darkness flies over him, tilts his head to look up—only pollen on the zephyr. And what's that? A worm, a chunky worm.

Safety, a feast, the scouring embrace.

This calls for a song.

A scruffy range frames the horizon to the south. The dawn chorus is a hectic peal. Not two feet from her, a mauve widowflower bows down when a bumblebee is added to its weight. Speckled butterflies attend yellow vetches.

Eric is standing straight, looking at the sky. Corbin is delivering his report. The words are nothing to her, weeks, minutes, actions, delays. The weather, the sun, the wind.

Snowdrops and thrifts hidden among other plants.

The solitude of being small and unnoticed.

Nettles in the sun, shepherd's purses in the shade.

Love ending in pain and humiliation. In undignified death.

Garin is stacking folded tents on the ground. Her sick tent, the blighted tent, the nerd tent. The ending of the tents.

Aden is loading up the pack animals. Li is walking two more toward him. Passing Erwin, she makes a remark only he can hear. "Whores to the last," Erwin counters with a belittling wave. Goes back to filling up the latrine pits. The ending of the camp.

Nissa is nowhere to be seen. The ending of the guest bed.

The priestess snaps out of it. When Corbin sees her look, his leg goes back

around the saddle. Helps her mount up without a word, goes for another set of reins.

A brown haired figure emerges from the bushes.

Pity, and the braid.

As day was breaking after their last night in the guest bed, Nissa's head turned slightly, bringing her ear closer to Ekks' mouth. She knew that was the time.

"It's been my everything," she whispered. Nissa's movement stopped. "The guest bed." Can words act as kisses? "Without you I would never know how good it can be."

Time slowed while they moved apart enough for a good look. Her guilt and shame—but to see them in a lover's eyes? To recognize their first encounter?

"Someone will make you feel that way forever. Every day. Forever."

The sadness in Nissa's eyes sublimating. The profundity of her loveliness. Ekks touched her cheek with a fingertip. With another. The light skin and her hand against it. Shapes moving, colors changing.

Their eyes met again.

"Forever was a dream," the priestess said. "We knew it was only this winter. The night, maybe, why it lasted so long. What they always say, I am here and now."

Miles away from the guest bed, Ekks nudges her horse.

Behind her, Garin is pointing out that "a big part of camping is knowing

where to squat.”

Wim beckons to her. Holding hands in the long twilight. Picking marigolds. Laughing at anything the other said. Moving in together. The image of his brother. Can the three of them reunite? Can Nissa join them?

Corbin rides beside her as they set off for the hills. She swallows, coughs, swallows again. Corbin pretends not to notice, his inaction as demeaning as his actions have been.

Many questions jostle for attention, although she thought she had a single one.

A wheeling flight of small birds. The sky is nearly blue.

“Why do the tents have names, but not the animals?”

When he grins, she knows the look in his eyes. “Naming tents is a joke. Naming animals is in bad taste. They’re more at ease if they can smell their familiars. We degrade ourselves by claiming to have named them.”

“Why camping?”

“To retrain ourselves.” His voice is quieter, the sentences blended. “To be a unit again. To have a mission.”

“What is a mission?”

“A difficult thing to do. A way to know yourself better. Try being honest. If you want.”

Cardamines straighten as hooves move on.

“Will I die like Wim?”

A fragrant gust cuts into her cheeks like hail.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Corbin’s chest and shoulders expand. “Why do you suppose we never went outside? I told you daylight would kill you, air would destroy the knitting of tissue inside. I told you that thrill was a curse. That we need to wait it out. Do you remember how much attention I paid to the weather on our way north?”

“No. I never noticed. Never realized. I thought, I thought you were jealous of Vim. When we got there...”

“The going around, the caves? Days spent waiting?”

Corbin’s eyes are hidden.

“Why did you trade” Vim’s horse “the other horse?”

“No need for it.”

Slim branches are leafing.

“Is Nissa safe?”

“She never went outside.”

“Can she get sick later?”

“The danger is gone.”

“What can I do?”

“You’re more than half dead. Make an infusion of rhubarb leaves, hemlock, nightshade. Bay leaves. Ask my brother about mushrooms. I can ask him if you want.”

They breast the morning, pushing it ahead and away. Their sounds permeate unseen delvings.

Ekks thinks of her hometown again, Sagaar where the Primal Apple fell, where only kindness was scarce. What has she done with her mother's advice, or with Corbin's?

Or her own to Nissa?

The times Nissa told her their special words, "Turn around." The times Ekks purred, "The braid." "Give me, the braid." "I need, the braid." The taut sheets when they made a fist.

Nissa would say her name slowly, like it was hard to let go. Like she would run out. Which she is going to, and soon.

The rest of the party catches up. Pansies greet the horses. There is no denying music begins and ends in silence.

Back at the last campsite, a badger rummages through the cooling firepit. A bone with some charred meat is buried in the ash. He gnaws on it patiently, assiduously. Daylight thickens. Jackdaws circle the dell, cawing.

An honorable person finds death just and fair,

As fair as their wedding day had been.

Filip Shiroka

Enmerkar and En-suhkesh-dana

written around 3250 BC

opening stanzas

A brick edifice crowns an ancient hilltop.
Its height and splendor bedeck the radiant fields.
Kulaba the hill and Uruk the city
Whose glory is too great for the Earth,
Whose glory enriches Heaven,
Whose glory is rainbow-colored and untarnished,
Whose glory is a new Moon in a starry sky.

A hill of well-laid brick, founded with good auguries,
Raised by nature and magnified by human labor.
As though tender moonlight had swept over the ground,
As though sunshine had gilded the land.
Where the hindmost cow and the foremost yield milk alike:
All this is Uruk, whose glory is insuperable,
Whose glory overtops mountain peaks where purest silver is mined,
Whose glory covers the land as a dress covers a lady,
One expertly woven with the sheerest linen.

11 Learning to Swim

The hall is drafty. Cold air swirls around the flanking columns. Hearths are built into the walls, the fires burning low.

The procession echoes from walls and ceiling. Passing down the colonnade, they glimpse children tending the fires. Spearmen are standing to attention in the spaces between. *Ffwop, ffwop*, their coats sound heavy and somber. An unwanted reminder.

Fabrics and stonework are rough, sturdy, much like everything else they have seen in this country. Made to endure, with little effort to please sight or touch.

They try to distract themselves from that ominous noise. The group. What brings them here. Water in the city's arteries, aqueducts, bathworks, fountains.

Silence as the five arrive before the mayor.

Having expected pomp and self-righteousness, relieved to be facing a personable looking older man. Avuncular. Plain cold weather clothes, the same as everyone else. Rises to greet them without a hint of weakness.

Eric guesses his age at around sixty-six.

"Welcome," the mayor says with a head turn.

High windows muffle the city.

All five have fair command of the language.

The mayor shows off healthy teeth. “Strangers from lands unknown, yet your reputation has preceded you. May I speak with one of you, whom you appoint?”

Garin pounces on his chance. “My lord mayor, we are here by consent.” Looking down at the old man in front of his elevated chair. It may seem uncomfortable because of their height. “My name is Garin Janson.”

Eric doubts he knows where he is going. He just likes to make a splash. A round of affirming neck and shoulder movements would follow him saying it.

As Garin waves Eric’s way, the mayor cuts him off. “Consent is a charming method. I owe my mayoralty to it.”

Swallows.

What to say. What to omit. “Would you care to see my garden?”

Barely a question.

A stick thin girl steps forward, dressed so similarly to the mayor that Eric took it for a uniform. Holding up a heavy embroidered cloak. Rigid and imposing, it recalls ceremonial armor. Face, arms, calves—no signs of exertion.

Five friends who trust each other with their lives keep their thoughts to themselves. Not one look is exchanged. Erwin thinks of the late twins’ alacrity, eyes flying, trying to connect. The twitching, the knees.

Their host leads them to a side door, to the right of the dais. A door attendant shows the way out.

A tidy green lawn is walled on three sides by the palace complex, sandstone

tinged with dull pink. In front of them, from north to south, stretches the city. The mayor's gardens are hillside terraces with trees and herbs. Suburbs sprawl across the river. Neat little houses are wrapped in shadow while the cones of mountains still shine. Through a deep cleft in the south, between their highest shoulders, the river meanders toward uncharted cloud forest and marshland.

The mayor directs their stroll to a pair of adjoining benches by the northeast wall. Erwin stops to look at rockfoils in the grass. Weeds jut from their parents' dried up remains in untended patches on each terrace.

The mayor stops and turns. They all stop and turn. He is looking at Erwin. Erwin looks back. The mayor points at purple basil. They have seen that somewhere.

"Did you know basil retains its freshness for less than a quarter of an hour? From when it was picked."

Erwin nods seriously. "I did, yes. I am very pleased to hear that you do too."

Daylight is sounding a retreat. Nature's night shift is taking over. To the north lies the open of the valley, and ice and snow beyond.

"I much enjoy being here." The mayor's eyes descend with Eric's to the river shallows with their islands and bridges. "The walls protect from cold winds, to a lesser degree also from summer heat. I can hardly tell them to clear the hall, you see. But they know I wish to be alone here. Some may envy you for that. Hmm. Not all are allowed with me here alone. And you have only arrived today. Sorry."

There can be no question he is in fact amused by the scandal and inconvenience to them which his inconsideration has caused. Eric decides he likes the old man. Explores helping his people thrive. To the others he continues to be more of a curio.

“Truth be told, I know your names.” The mayor looks at Garin. “The elder Captain Janson in particular needs little introduction.” A smile among the lines and whiskers. “I thank you on behalf of the parents. The sons called for it.”

Wind whistles on rooftops. Eric allows himself to hope his friend is keeping quiet for reasons of modesty. Takes the initiative before Garin can dispel that with a riposte.

“My lord mayor, who could be surprised that the ruler of such a great city has means of obtaining intelligence? Among the many traits and resources behooving statecraft.”

“Very kind of you.” An afterthought nod. “I must say, though ‘ruler’ is a bit strong, envoys from abroad, residing here for years, will be put to shame by your skill in our speech. Hmm hah, that should be quite the round of introductions. I understand you prefer given names. How refreshing. We may thus dispense with your lord mayor.”

Five obliging pairs of eyes.

“Tirinn.”

“Tirhyn,” Garin repeats. “In our language, it means”

“Tirinn,” the mayor cuts him off again, lips slightly curled.

Two cautions suffice for many. “Tirinnn.”

Corbin suppresses a chuckle on Eric’s other side, behind the mayor.

Deservedly, as the fadeout was ludicrous.

“You will learn. Names are more difficult than other words. I believe that you my dear guests are here to warn me of a threat to the city, if not the valley as a whole. Is this true?”

“My lord—Tirinn, forgive me if I presume: the danger is greater than you know. In some hundreds of years, changes will occur in the weather. Ices will melt in the far north. Seas will rise. Much that seems strong will be weakened or reduced to nothing. People will be as children when waters recede, relearning everything, remembering little of the past. Eric Edricson.”

The mayor’s eyebrows go up. Nods and Eric concludes. “Sir, in this city, in your city, as in few other places, perhaps nowhere else, experience has a survival chance. Our grandchildren need not repeat our mistakes, or mistakes—those before us made.”

Tirinn looks at the daunting heights streaked with white and yellow. “That is indeed not the threat I had in mind. Before we clear that up, tell me if any of you have children.”

“Not yet,” Eric again preempts wise remarks. Dimly aware of a demotion from the prow, of being made to plug the leaks. Good fun so far, fair game. Name endings. Should they sit? Is there room for all six?

A head shake is Tirinn’s most decisive gesture so far. “You should not, then,

make such bold statements about those before. And what mistakes they might have made.” In a succession of eye contacts they glimpse knowledge rooted far deeper than theirs, if more loamy and untaught. “Their mistakes were necessary. They were children once. Bear that in mind, you greats learning from a small. Move past the desire to prevent blunders. Past the sorrow. Sorrow is useless. Crippling, and useless.”

Having found the statement, takes a long breath, holds and releases. It clouds, spreads. Breaks up.

“We have wasted much time.” No longer amiably slow, the mayor changes tone, covers ground. Resumes the stroll. “What we are sharing is best kept from hearsay. In the garden, no one is listening. You speak of hundreds of years. This knowledge is based on what?”

“Studying the weather,” Eric answers.

“Your arts could hardly have failed to alert you to another—more *urgent* threat.”

A second eye-count.

“It is a difficulty. Aden Janson. As Eric said”

“Difficulty,” the mayor interrupts yet again. Too much time with subordinates. “You are saying they can be stopped.”

“Certainly they can be stopped.” Eric guesses the old man will have no patience for Aden’s theories. “Anything one person sets in motion, another can stop.” Not a word among the five as yet. “My lord Tirinn, please allow me to say

that whether this city falls to its enemies is not our concern. Harmony and peace are to be cherished. We wish to see your neighbors and you prosper—none of that makes it our purpose.

“The danger I have presented is very real. No matter what happens to the valley in the intervening years, no matter what anyone does, ices *will* melt. Waters *will* rise. It can be prevented no more than winter or old age. Everything will be destroyed. The mountains may protect you from the convulsions, or they may not. Sir, this is the day for which we must prepare. In comparison, the army of wild men is a paltry inconvenience.”

Tirinn’s forehead ridges grow. “This threat of the water, you say, is many generations in the future. How can we prepare for it?”

“Try learning to swim. Corbin Mananson.”

When Tirinn cackles, Eric sees the resemblance to the girl who held his overcoat. The unlined young man.

This high up, few sounds are louder than the wind.

“Tell me your purpose,” the mayor says. “As you know it.”

“To do our duty,” Aden replies.

“To pursue beauty,” his brother adds.

“To intuit the truth,” Erwin joins in.

“To have fun,” Corbin says quietly. Tirinn looks at Eric.

“To spread kindness.”

The Sun is sending out a last caress. Shadows are pouring out from corners,

melding into darkness. The evening star heralds the kindling of city lights.

“I trust you have a plan how to proceed.” The mayor’s resigned voice makes him an old man again.

“We do,” Eric and Aden answer in duet. Aden nods after the first eye contact since they entered the hall. Out of the game.

“Nothing expensive or troublesome,” Eric announces.

A triad of benches on the garden hill’s western spur. The path leads no further. Garin and Aden sit apart from Eric, Corbin and Erwin. After looking at the empty space, Tirinn sits on the third bench by himself.

Erwin cranes his neck to take in the long green valley. Walls and roofs are gleaming crimson. A dream scene, a vision of another world. The river a tree bearing moon cherries and star leaves.

Eric rises and crosses the path to the lawn, the indigo sky a natural stage. Grass swallows his boots up to the ankle.

“We would buy the land for a large house, inside or near the city. We would pay your builders what they commonly charge. The basement in particular would need to be very large. Outside the city may be better, with a gatehouse above. Our first task will be gathering information. We would also buy one sizable house for each of us. Preferably abutting.”

“I was told,” Tirinn fires out as soon as Eric has finished, “of two ladies up in Takt, in addition to young... native... associates.”

Eric smiles at the others’ discomfort. Every one. “True.” Gives his friends a

teasing grin. “We would hire cooks, caretakers and such, for our houses. The big basement house should require no staff if all goes well.”

The mayor relaxes after his face had lined again. Imprints of troughs remain.

Branches begin to sag.

“Tell me of this horde in the north. Have you passed its dominion?”

“No, my lord.”

“Tirinn.”

Eric nods. “Sir. No enemy can take your city if it is well defended. In the time before they are anywhere near, such defenses can be constructed. So too in the towns. Soldiers can be trained if they still pose a threat, citizens can help. Townspeople. Children, the elderly, those without an arm or a leg, or blind, everyone can contribute in some way. Allies can be found. The invaders need not be defeated, only resisted until they turn to timider prey. We can oversee your defenses, here and elsewhere. Such a fulsome body of work calls for requital.”

“Lands, houses, staff for your intelligence work and your diverse projects. Could this be the payment?”

After a quick meeting of eyes, Eric nods agreement to the mayor.

“Good. I am frozen solid. Send for your people. Better yet, I will. The mansions, why not tomorrow? The land can wait. Kindly join me for a bite as we make the arrangements.”

Pats his knees, rises less spryly than before. Eyes are seeking out the door.

To Erwin the darkling terraces are brimming with lyke poppies.

12 Chess Under the Stars

On the seventh night in the city, an invitation goes out for one of the five to enjoy a chess game with the mayor. The messenger waits outside their gated community as they discuss it with looks and gestures. In the deepening dusk Erwin pleads, “Not me.”

Thus Aden is shown into the palace gardens, through the far more imposing main entrance. A junior granddaughter directs him down a torchlit staircase with inlaid railing.

At a landing he turns to the southerly breeze rolling uphill over the city lights.

A clutch of uniformed youth surrounds the mayor’s bench. He is bent over a chessboard with a game underway. Tirinn’s red pieces hold all the center squares. Having gained awareness of his visitor, indicates Aden is to replace the previous opponent. Or so it would seem.

As Aden is sitting down, the mayor nods and three helpers spring forward. At his wave they remove the board with a rehearsed economy of movement.

“A game against the queen of Dilm.” Stares at a low brick wall overgrown with creepers. “To the west. Southwest. We exchange messages. I have two horse on her. Two horse and three foot. Turning twenty this summer. Twenty, can you believe that? She has put down two rebel aunts, in wars not chess. She is

rash. Rash. Easily trapped. She feels threatened by the horde in the prairie, these Takers. The waters, hmm, less so. Distinctly less. Maybe I will get her to attack them and draw their attention, as your reputé grows faster than your hole. Hmm.”

An impish smile as he looks at the blond young man. The shoulders, the skintight leather clothes.

“Sir, about the hole. The workers—are they content?” Although Aden’s face is a pose of gravity, dithering gives him away. “They are training for the, more, challenging, work to follow.”

The mayor smiles with amusement. “Their families praise you on a daily basis. The infirmary, the lunches, they can dream of this at home. What’s more, we never, hmm, never felt much esteem for construction work. You’ve turned them into eligible bachelors, with young ladies making some reconsiderations. Or indeed gentlemen. What with *your* young ladies’ fashion taking hold—among some...”

Aden fidgets in his seat. Levers himself up from the music and the water. Tirinn fingers his beard.

“... each half of our society has a new reason to hold the other in contempt. Would you like an unorthodox opening disposition for our game?”

“That sounds too much of a challenge. Forgive me.”

Neither have any greetings been exchanged nor any victuals offered. What would Tirinn be like as a woman? At his sideways nod two boys return with

another chessboard, set for a game.

“The hole needs to be much deeper.” Aden follows the pair with his eyes to where they stop outside the light. “A firm foundation is vital to the stillness we require.”

“You choose words with unrelenting precision.”

“Thank you. I do set store by it.”

“The young will set store by what they have to say. Do you wish to open?”

“I would rather defer.”

The mayor reaches for his queenside horse.

Aden walls in.

Each exchange leaves the host in a more dominant position.

Eight turns in, Aden’s defense leaking, Tirinn raises his eyes from the board.

“The charming name you’ve given our city is also spreading.”

Aden smiles against his better judgment. “We traveled for weeks. Fabled City in the south, where rivers run through houses. The many accounts, our ladyfriends were, very much looking forward to the amenities. They asked us ‘How long till Sewer City?’ most every day.”

Takes his time for each move, whereas his host’s expeditiousness borders on aggression. Palace walls are a stone cape streaming above and behind the mayor. On the secluded lawn, time spent in thought is golden sand falling, stardust from a sable sky.

Pockets of buff carvings remain, the outcome fixed past serious contention.

“Sir—hardly a matchup.”

The mayor leans back, hands in his lap. No demurring. “Is it too soon to make predictions about your purpose? Is that buried in the bedrock?”

What is he really asking? “The city moves at an easy pace. My friends are enjoying this, after camping. Our purpose is waiting for us to settle in.”

Tirinn nods slowly. That was anything but an answer. He had asked the same when they were all there.

“Our purpose is to spread kindness.” Aden tries to sound reassuring. “To lay the groundwork for the sharing of knowledge. That selfishness is destructive and self-negating. That giving is the recursion of the blessing bestowed at our birth. Perhaps at the world’s birth. I feel this must be the duty of anyone conscious of it. Of anyone who has advanced that far.”

“A noble purpose, I confess.” The mayor looks up at the stars, prominent cheekbones yellowed by torchlight. “To be young, to have dreams. Later in life, cares proliferate. We are responsible for the wellbeing of the less experienced. Too late to extricate ourselves. Nothing is as it ought to be. Helping means withholding help from many. You mentioned the world’s birth. Do you believe in free will or in the preordained?”

Tree-wings rise and fall on the mountainsides, brightening the stars.

“You leave out chance. We follow natural rhythms. We sleep when we are tired, we go through stages of life. Within that framework we have freedom. The seen and the heard are often incentives. Wishing to belong, we strive to emulate

that which has made a mark on us. We therefore fit into molds not of our making half-knowingly, if at all.”

“Your brother, your friends?”

“They would defend our purpose using their words. We feel we hold each other’s excesses in restraint. Somewhat. My brother is interested in beauty, as he sees it. He, in this, if he was here, he would disparage my trust in the fruits of actions. In consequences.”

“Which you use alongside duty to justify your license to act. In the fullness of time every consequence will be known, excepting loss to fire and water. We must do what we can against this loss, or in spite of it.”

“Yes.”

“Have you considered movement may not be straight, not forward like the journey that led you here? Hmm? Does the world not move in cycles? Seasons, years, stages of *lives* rather. One generation gives way to another. Our chess game under the stars may have been played years ago. It may have been the first game played when chess was invented. Do you know this story, perchance?”

“The sack of grain story?”

The mayor’s nod is more involved. “Do you know the number?”

Aden purses his lips. “I, no. I might, I could add it up—in time.”

“No doubt.” At Tirinn’s pointed grimace a small girl approaches from her station by the bottom landing. She waits for the mayor to signal the launch.

“Thirty-six billion billion, eight hundred ninety-three million billion, four

hundred eighty-eight thousand one hundred forty-seven billion, four hundred nineteen million, one hundred and three thousand, two hundred thirty-one.”

Aden indulges in a complimentary smile. The girl withdraws to her post. Tirinn’s voice is a bear’s growl from the other side, a sepulchral rasp after the lilting numbers.

“The king had him put to death. Presumption, you see, petitioning for the unattainable. Less majesty, a major crime, which the sage would have known. The story was remembered, though. There is that.”

Music is floating up to the terrace gardens, unsobber humans imitating skylarks.

“As Captain Edricson kindly pointed out, you aren’t the only ones gathering intelligence. The Takers. We used to think their numbers were the main threat. Their chiefs collect tribute. They must be seen spending it at all times. Younger men prove themselves by raiding for slaves and treasure. They try to outdo one another in violence and cruelty. They call this the life. Superior chiefs have prominent followers in the life. To many of them the life is what matters, not wealth or power. That appears to be gaining strength.

“In this our Sewer City,” the mayor’s voice is barely audible, “people have entrusted my family with license to act. They wish to live, but how? Refugees’ tales chill me to the bone. They set a house on fire, holding the children as the chief ravages the wife or daughter. The children are thrown into the fire to enhance his climax. The thought cannot be borne this depravity is an aspect of

ourselves. To oppose these Takers we must be warriors, soldiers, the king not the sage. We are not this. How can we, can your friends and you be this king? Can you defend us, so that our grandchildren live to see the waters rise?”

“Sir.” Aden trails off. A fluttering bat goes well with the torchlight. “Myself, alone, I can do little. What I can I will. I can speak on behalf of no other.”

“Not even your friends.”

“We five can face your Takers on our own. Convert them into Makers, Givers. Sir, your city is unimportant to my friends. As are, my, thoughtful considerations to my brother, who thinks he has the answers.”

Seeing Tirinn troubled, searching for words, tries a new line of argument. “Your city is beautiful, the waterworks, the views, sir, both are breathtaking. But you can never be what we miss. That can never come again for hundreds of generations.” Another bat joins the first. “My friends are given to past regrets more than I am. Vastly more. That we five take in you, valley, city, your family, as sixth—sir, they can never wish for this. As you can never share their regrets.”

“You share little of those regrets.”

“Our friendship is older than the regrets. Sir, for myself, the peace of mind for my main considerations is the essence. The deep foundation. I *am* helping your city by training the workers. If I encourage my friends,” head shake, “they would more likely do the opposite. I *will* look into it. I will see what can be done.”

“Very well. Do see what can be done. About saving our city while surviving

the waters.”

“While ascending to the true self, though it be best guess. That best guess is ours to make. No one can take that away.”

After a mutual nod Tirinn adds, “The most that can be hoped for is to play an honorable part in the poem, during our verses. To be picking the wildflowers that shade the meadow.”

Aden can think of no follow up.

Before long the youthful staff bring food and wine, making talk even more superfluous.

The eating done, the understanding that the visit has run its course is accentuated by notes of jasmine. The mayor confirms it with “A faster way out is the small door we used last time.

“I should be following, and soon.”

Truthfulness must be discerned from sincerity.

Frigyes Karinthy

13 The Peace Offer

Garin's garden is reverberant with light and music. The novelty of the experience is palpable in the audience's rapt attention. The old crowd under the arches are no less spellbound than young dancers across the pool. There are inner circles, too, among the solemn valley elders, as on the dance floor.

Unwelcome memories stirring, the thinking man faces the stage. Garin's band is beating out the music, waving their instruments as they march around one another. A brook's fall over a cliff edge fills the brief silences. The sound of the waterfall brings up the same painful nakedness. He tries to renounce an unsettling realization. The story they are enacting, he knows it, knows how it ends. The sky above the cliff, is that what made him think of it?

As near the brink as horses would go, one person made of five bodies. Or so they thought. Five, down from six. Maybe more.

Erwin redoubles his effort to look and listen. Throbbing music intertwines with burbling water. He suspects the band will lay down their beating implements soon after this crest of intensity. Noting his brother with the dignitaries, shifts his weight to look over the hedge.

Garin has reinvented the music with impressive fidelity, given the constraints. As though wishing to wallow in bereavement. Is there a way to avoid it? In a flash flood Erwin is back to being Junior Dancer, a prodigy at

throwing his limbs around, together yet apart. Later cocktails and small talk about the music machines. Whether Tia was better with him or with Garin. The scariest bogey was army duty. A year later, this gem of a city, just as absurdly, just as blindly, leaping toward disaster.

The small towns Across, walls no taller than the houses. Hairline tunnels underneath lacking secondaries.

“All that banging aspires to this,” a languorous entertainment seeker drawls behind Erwin’s left shoulder. The music is new to the valley; its instigator, their host, a celebrity.

Space opens up between Corbin’s company and the drinks table. They drift toward it, two moving more eagerly, holding empty cups. Corbin’s head turns when he sees his brother. Squints to make out the moving shapes.

Children in the trees.

A dozen from the neighborhood, precarious among the branches, hidden from grownups by other trees behind them.

Corbin catches a white-clad usher’s attention.

Nissa disentangles herself from talk and walks over to him. Breaths are sucked in, shoulders are tapped, heads are turning, drinks are sipped. She waits for Corbin to finish giving the boy instructions.

A second pair in white joins them. Girl and boy. Garin seems to have appointed only his most captivating gym minions to usher duty. The stares they attract merge with the many transfixed by Corbin and Nissa. Clothing and

hairstyles suggest the staring is largely done by the unsophisticated Across contingent. Garin stands out, smug and statuesque, now that the light has steadied on the portico. Next to him, by the pool, the teacher Nissa is seeing? The water is mottled blue and yellow. Corbin is in great demand.

The musicians are unstrapping their gear, having gotten rid of their admirers. Two big men wearing silks and jewels steal covert glances at Nissa.

“Please, my dear Tydd, please,” the same voice from behind.

“Oh, no. Brunbo, all you girls, please.”

Serrated edges of torchlight ebb and flow. Corbin having answered her question, Nissa heads downstairs. Eyes and necks clear her path like grass in a high wind. The tacky strangers down their drinks after a valedictory ogle.

A shame she never found her style the way Ekks did.

Erwin sees friends from Taket on the other side of the stage. Recalling an unfinished conversation, makes his way through the humming light.

“Eric.”

“Oh, hello!”

On his way out. His shoulders were slouched. It would have been a long day for him, as Corbin said he had just completed a circuit.

“Do you have to go? I need to tell you things.”

Heartening smile. “You’re moving out.”

Smiles back and nods.

“Was that her by the big statue?”

Nods again, beaming.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

Three names remain unspoken, three people there and not there, imprints of love given and received.

“Something else.” Falters when his face rearranges. “There’s more. I have more.” Brings her eyes down, abashed.

As the buzz of conversation capers downstairs, lights color the walls, cerise, lavender, rainswept brown.

“Something about the time you went to live with Corbin’s mom” and Tia’s “and Erwin’s.”

“Tell me something.”

“Yes. Yes. Garin especially, and the others all think Corbin is your second, after you, you are first?”

“My second. Yes. Go on.”

“Corbin is your second because you lived with his mom. Because you two are best friends. It needs to be, not because of that.”

“Very true. Not because of that. It needs to be on merit.” A rare sly grin. “They all think Corbin is second by virtue of being my best friend.”

“Corbin thinks it too. I asked him. But this, this is it. Garin thinks, he’s

always thought, that he never had a chance. To be the second.” Draws a careful breath. “The others agree. He never had a chance.”

Eric’s eyes dart around for a moment. Nissa has never seen him lose control to such a degree.

“Thank you for telling me this,” addresses her shoulder.

“I hate to keep you any longer.”

Head shake. An odd grating sound turns into more of that upbeat music.

“Why, why did my brother have to die? Garin said...”

Eric waits behind his usual mask of calm.

“He said he’d be fine.”

“Garin saw no threat to Ev’s life when he said that. He may have missed something. Or your brother may have sustained other injuries. Garin said that before you started off. One of your brother’s eyes, the color in the middle, had gotten bigger, and in the other eye, smaller. Narrower.”

She has to look up to see.

“Easy for us to miss. In your eyes, easier maybe. His fists were clenched inward. That means a severe injury to his head. It can be invisible, with no wound on the outside. While being carried, that’s very likely when there are other injuries.”

Hears the entreaty in his voice and shrugs. The vernal night is mirrored in his look.

“What can I say? I hope everyone else is told intriguing mysteries by a

ravishing lady.”

“Always a pleasure,” adds at Nissa’s lackluster smile.

The band’s third performance is in full swing, half birdsong, half avalanche. The sprightly rhythm tails off behind each corner until the city drowns it out. Thinks of the caves he has seen as he walks up the northwest suburbs to the Library Fort. Workers chipping stone away night and day, tunnels crawling to a meeting like coy lovers. People and goods moving through narrow doors hidden from view.

Having heard him descend, Aden rises as the door slides open. Eric responds in kind.

“They’re not taking their defense seriously. We need to drive home that they need to apply themselves.”

“We can pressure them. Or not.”

“Illuminating, helpful. Much obliged.”

Aden smiles. Eric steps aside, allowing his friend to move past into a hallway.

Eric looks down, left, right. Aden says,

“Tell me about the orphans.”

Eric tries to hide his fury. “They kept them in cages. In cages fit for puppies. Or birds. For two years. Two years. When they were certain they would live, one

in four, five, they would—”

“Let them out.”

Angry snort, thoughts waved away. The furnishings, the place itself, Aden’s achievement pales against this despicable callousness. “In the end I only saw the caves and the tunnels.”

“Almost done here,” Aden rejoins, looking around. Having given Eric a quick tour, adds, “A few finishing touches. I heard you made the pledge.”

A sniffing sound. What’s happened to him? “The kid. This orphan girl begged me to help defend the valley. I said, anything she wants. She said, can you please save us from the savages? *Us*, mind you. The other kids agreed. They were waiting for someone to speak out.”

“I made a similar pledge to the mayor. Back when we played chess.”

Aden hears Eric’s teeth. The orphans’ lot must have been unspeakable. He should change the subject.

“Garin’s band?”

Head lowered in remembrance. “They bang things loudly. Fairly loudly.”

“Ha ha.”

“The median age at the party could’ve been fifteen. The band, they do have a sense of measure. Their modulations are negligent, predictable, once you grasp where they’re going. It was ingeniously staged, with ushers, with people in charge of lighting, some up on rooftops. I made it through two numbers. I missed Erwin, I was looking forward to his opinion.”

“Was there dancing?”

“Movements,” Eric allows. “There was no dancing on the stage. There was plenty in front. Senior Dancer held back. I didn’t think to bring it up.”

“I can imagine what he taught them, and how. You know Garin just wants to build his own monument, even if he means it to be, inspirational.”

“The gym’s main line is weaponless combat, your brother’s...”

“Expertise?”

“I would’ve said passion. The music, he needs them for the band. The gym is his way of scouting for musicians. Have you heard the joke?”

“Worshipped”

Eric nods.

“from two feet below or more.”

Back in the front room, in armchairs facing a low table. Drinks and snacks lie on it untouched.

“Defense,” Eric says. “Tunnels.”

“A month, I’d say. No more. For all the towns to connect. That should be fine.”

“At the present pace.”

Aden nods. Their flawed assumption had been that conspicuous danger would speed up the work. Perhaps change opinions regarding secondaries.

“I heard quite a bit about the Peace Offer, on my circuit.”

“It seems to be working,” Aden suggests. “Or, to be well underway. Buying

your enemies off resolves the conflict without violence. Rids you of material possessions. Desirable outcomes. We would've flopped in the qualifiers if they'd allowed it."

"They would never have allowed it for us. Only for the connected darlings. Here? Here it fosters smuggling. Worse, it prunes away moderates. They're the ones taking the offer. The refusers, the ones who stay behind, that would be the ones addicted to torture and destruction. The name, though. The Peace Offer."

A look brings understanding.

"They think this is war."

Eric nods, reaching for his drink.

14 Champions

The lower reaches of society may well prove more potent and effective than the intellectual circles. We tend to think that intellectuals—in the broadest sense, including scientists—define our lives. But lately the intellectuals have been rather like a film of oil on a great puddle of water: glinting mischievously, thinking of itself as the totality, while being in truth only one molecule thick.

I can see quite definite things coming toward us. The workings of the so-called cultural underground, or the so-called subculture, are very strange.

Ekkehard Hieronymus

Windows are open, yet the room is oppressively stifling despite unseasonable rain. Its patter distracts the valley natives, stiling talk. Not that anyone present has urgent news to share. Especially not good news.

Tirinn, a first among equals, is gazing at the absent Taket mayor's seat. "Our disagreements must—*must*—be held in abeyance until the common threat passes."

Old fashioned tapestries adorn the sandstone walls. The fragrance of freshly washed earth wafts around the room.

“The common threat is passing,” another mayor proposes. Garin knows the tubby little man comes from Across without having bothered to learn names or domains. “The enemy is greatly diminished. Violence has been sporadic for weeks. The City is clear of being fully invested. Taket, yes, up in the open of the valley, they would be.” He too looks at the empty chair. “Maybe some, something...” Pointing over his shoulder, leaving the sentence pendent, looks away. “I say, press on with the Ransom.”

His neighbor looks him over with the most cordial repugnance. “You miserable crook, an honest day’s *work*, do you know what that *means*?” Her head punctuates the clauses, as though to speed them along.

The portly mayor sits up straight amid nods from his peers. As he mouths a retort, a door opens and hurried footsteps approach.

The massive chairs impede turning. With the assembly shifting and squirming, a young woman in a sweat-stained tunic quickly positions herself behind the vacant seat. Her drawn features exude grief and horror, chest heaves reaching her shoulders.

“It raises expectations,” Tirinn says, “having a Hearing of the Voices disrupted.”

With a deep breath, his elder granddaughter takes the plunge. “My ladies, my lords, captains, forgive me.” Looks down, intimidated by the eyes of authority. “The tunnels. Ladies, sirs, they are *in the tunnels*.”

Eyes widen, mouths are covered.

“Just north, on, on this side, past the townships.”

“At the junction?” Eric asks.

“Yes, sir. Yes. At the junction. They, they have, they, they have made a —*challenge*.” Her eyes touch Eric’s. “Our champions must meet their champions at sundown. Or, or the townships will be overrun. And, they are in the tunnels.”

“Which have no secondaries,” Corbin huffs.

No one is looking at anyone else. All recall the atrocities that could not be prevented, the rapes, the burnings, the carnage. The battered defenses.

A westering sun lances the cover. Chirping is a travesty of hope.

“How many?” Eric wants to know. The messenger swallows. “How many of their champions as you say are behind this challenge?”

“Sir, I—four. Three or four. I’m less certain of the fourth.”

Erwin affects a sighs of relief. “Outstanding.” His brother sniggers.

Eric raises his head very slightly, a sign to his friends. “Time for the Wergild School to prove its mettle.” While the words fly past the mayors, there can be no mistaking the four young men rising as one.

“Offer to buy them off,” the fleshy representative from Across advances. Although no one responds, eyes and movements bear out peer disgust as he turns from Eric to Corbin and back. “We cannot afford to lose you gentlemen. We will meet *any price*.”

“The elder Captain Janson might bring his musicians,” Tirinn offers. “The

banging ought to help scare them away.” Corbin holds back laughter until the mayor has almost finished.

Good cheer follows the armored champions down the training grounds. Is there no desperation underneath? Eric ascribes the question to his bitterness and exhaustion after a summer of near-daily skirmishes. Watercolor clouds blush below peaks of white gold, spent for the time being. Many break off from training or staring and file behind the four heroes, the giants in steel.

The northeast corner of the city walls. As previously, the rampart strikes Eric as low and thin, entirely unsatisfactory. It has served its purpose against an enemy unaccustomed to such resourceful defense.

Shadows of houses and trees lean toward the corner as the procession nears a barred gate. Flourishing wardens jump to attention and clear the way. Eric spares them a nod as he steps into the passage.

The river road outside is in ruins. Wading through the sludge proves difficult. Their entourage’s restrained murmurs turn grouchy. None of them having used this way much recently, they look around at the rubble already green with sprouting weeds. Honeysuckle clings to stumps and the burned shells of houses. A huge snail perches atop a boulder, loitering imprudently in the open. Garin reminds himself to lower it on the way back.

Talk amongst their following subsides again as they catch sight of the crater.

A swath of fresh destruction surrounds it: uprooted trees and bushes, broken stonework, drag marks, corpses, carcasses. Flies are converging, a few of the boldest crows showing the way.

Curious besiegers watch their progress.

“Many are uncertain what to make of us,” Corbin points out. Lightning arrows to a western hilltop.

“We’ll be facing fighters, not leaders as such,” Eric concurs. “A chance for a strong statement.”

“Could be the only chance. You heard it today—divisions run deep.”

A beaten path down to the center is revealed as the crowd swells around the crater. Corbin turns to check their followers are marshaling peers and youth into a broad perimeter.

A forbidding person appears to be awaiting challenge at the bottom. A bearded, hulking thug, garishly dressed, fingering a heavy mace, alone. Eric gives a curt bow and makes straight for him.

A roar spreads from one side, anticipating the clash. The noise spikes, and is cut short when Eric steps back, having disarmed his opponent.

A curse rings out in the sudden hush.

Eric stands still as the other jumps to recover his weapon. He swings low, far too slowly. From the ground he raises...

Five inches of mace-handle.

Holds it up for a look.

Feels the sword at his throat.

Makes to stand up.

Reconsiders.

A deafening tumult of derision. “Snuff!”

“Snuff!”

“Snuff the turd!”

The sword withdraws. The pitiful person gets to his feet. Careens into oblivion.

Turning around, Eric yells to be heard. “Can I deny him this? You go next.”

Corbin takes control of his face. Twice now he got away with it.

Garin’s many followers clap and chant.

“Gaarin, Gaarin!” The most enthusiastic are slapping their sides, skipping, stomping. “Gaarin, Gaarin!”

“Gaaarin,” Corbin mocks. Aden joins in. Stops and listens to the clamor.

There is some confusion about Garin’s opposition as he struts to the center of the arena. Eric is tall but Garin is immense. Stares break on him like waves on a headland.

Raising his arms, points. With both.

Cheering from two sides.

“Listen,” Aden breathes down Eric’s neck. “They each have their side.”

The challenged are pointing at Garin, making demands, out of their earshot.

“No mixing,” Eric agrees with the head at his shoulder.

“No weapons, no armor?” Corbin shouts out. “People are counting on you.”

Turning, Garin manages to tower over Corbin. How does he do this? “Have faith,” says in an apt tone. Already free of armor—his friends have only removed their helmets. He could add any number of statements. Two at least regarding the main controversy. Eric was unaware of this previously, and would have dismissed the statements, had they been made. Would have assumed Garin was joking.

Garin turns to his work and bows. Opponents jump him. Hunches over and protects his head.

In the last possible instant, arms strike out like snakes. The pair collide in midair, limbs flailing. Garin stands up.

Victory.

“Gaarin, Gaarin!”

Crowd noise has changed. A threatening, discordant din is surging outside the arena. A harsh drumbeat, is that horse hooves? Something else, a repeated shout, neighbors are being asked about it. A jeering chant.

“Venom, venom,” is that what they are saying?

The crater is an active volcano of people. Though at first they helped each other out, fires make it clear who belongs where. Taunting leads to shoving. The drunkest reach for weapons with clumsy hands. None of that is the noise which

brought everyone out. A group some way from the arena, what is that, what are they doing?

Aden appears at Eric's side. "I see no leadership."

Garin is nearby landing punches, knocking heads together, lifting people and throwing them. Bellows, "Thanks for the help."

They continue to ignore him.

"A celebration of freedom," Eric says. Aden exclaims.

"A guess," Eric admits.

"A good one."

Both then look left.

A mounted Corbin is charging. The horse is struggling to keep up a run under the unfurling stars. The rider is brandishing his sword. "BRING IT ON, YOU BUGS!" Volume compensates for helmet-caused indistinctness.

"Best thing in reach," Aden means the horse.

"No question," Eric's tone is likewise insouciant. "Happened to be there."

Their followers are building on Corbin's charge. Partly rearmored, Garin makes to tag along, too late, the action is too fast. The three of them watch Corbin wedge into the press. It breaks.

No one is putting up a fight.

Victory.

Eric feels a hand on his upper back.

"Look." Garin is pointing at people trying to alert others—there, the

messenger, Tirinn's granddaughter.

"Let her through," and they part.

The messenger returns Eric's look, brings the Jansons to view, and unreels her arm...

Northward.

"The smokes," Aden states the obvious.

Three white smoke spires against the night sky. The emergency signal from Taket. They may not know the tunnels have been compromised.

"Sirs, Captain Mananson, your friend, Erwin..."

Snap snap snap, three turn heads. A fourth is being patted on the armored back. What about the inscrutable fifth, the strangest?

"... he, he, has, gone, to help."

"Help Taket?" Eric coughs out. "Gone how?"

The messenger wilts under their looks. "I, they, I, he, he rode up."

"He tried to lift the siege," Garin sounds incredulous.

"There was no siege. He, I, they were all, oh ah, they, they were here. Hereabouts. He, he, Erwin, he took, twenty-six went with him."

"How did he come up with twenty-six hundred? Were they all armed?"

"Twenty-six people," Garin corrects his brother.

The messenger nods. "No sir. Yes sir. Twenty-six people. He brought twenty-six people. Twelve women, fourteen men. All armed. I can tell you their names."

Corbin's retinue is drawing closer. The brave horse is led away.

Names.

Garin looks around. "I can take everyone here. Five, six maybe."

Despite five hundred being a generous estimate, to Eric six still sounds like a bad joke. Garin is implying the others not go with him.

"Corry," he urges. "That would make it three more people, in all that area. What are you gonna do, shout?"

Garin is ignoring the messenger. At Eric's nod the young woman runs away.

The entire course of events is so unlike Erwin there is little room for other thought. All three are making the same guess. Corbin's head is turning.

"Do that," Eric says.

15 The Turnpike Stair

Destroying is changing. Destroying is transforming.

Pio Baroja

Where is the purple eyed princess? How can we find her? Is she out there,
an idea, part of you?

Is she you?

She needs to open a door. The door is ours and good, and only she can open
it. We are nothing ourselves, transparent, finding her is what we are.

We recoil as things strike at us. Faces are turning, not her, never her. None
of them are the princess and it must be her, there is no other way. Finding her is
our solace.

Some we wish to avoid. How can we tell? Whoever we tap on the shoulder,
how can we tell? Whoever turns around next might be one of those we wish to
avoid. Our weakness, our horror chasing from behind.

Our brother is flying with us. Our friends all share the weakness. On top of
that each has his own. Where is our sister?

Falling not flying, weight dragging down.

Couch grass near the edge of destruction. "Africa. We need to be there. We
need eyes on the ground." As we look for the princess.

You hate putting yourself forward. “You’re saying one of us should go scouting.” And miss out.

He looks at you.

“With a pair of twins, you know when I do.”

“With a pair of *trained* twins,” your brother says, turning away from—turning away—but the most basic drill should suffice. Given they are young enough.

Falling, sliding, tumbling down. The world is an enormous drop-off.

A body of water in front. You have never seen a sky so blue.

“Wait here. Planning takes the fun away.” You are past fear. Air is hot and dry. You want things to happen, but he never does as told.

“Why?” The simple stupid question. No training to speak of.

“I said wait here. We only have one goatskin.”

Picks up on your reproving tone. Later, though, you see bundles floating, and look how fast the current is all of a sudden.

You know you are in the presence of death before your head is turned.

“Love her for me,” Vim calls out, as he never did.

He was dead when you saw him. You were about to start back.

Mutinied to prove his worth. Wanted to help. Everyone wants to help with everything they do.

You have crossed the river, he is dead, they are gone. You must move on. You must try and help. Do what you can.

Friends have been waiting for you. Honest, trustworthy friends.

There is the princess, in front of the door. It's opening. Her hand.

You look down at the moonlit shingle. Not one drop. She is faking, it has nothing to do with blood. Blood is a myth after all.

But the door, there used to be nothing there and now a door has opened, you must look at it.

You rise and enter.

The door, no, where are you going?

You are safe. Safe, having won the door. You have found the princess. You are in plush safety. Your sister is asking.

You have time for a 'no.' You have time to begin it, and it lengthens and gyrates as it leaves you. Whom are you addressing? What are you rejecting?

"Manan if it's a boy, what do you think?"

You know her voice. Her tone. How can you look at her? How can you talk to her? She is dead.

"She was the best of us all. Tell your brother and the Edricson I said that."

They were engaged, and she is dead.

"I can't love him for you." That much you know.

You have been looking down. Your legs, the floor, the Earth's furnace cellar.

Says his name. He appears by her side.

The princess, Lady Pzam's daughter, Svee. You think of her eyes as you look into theirs. Your sister, who is dead, shares the look with your brother

beside her. Ineffable sadness, or maybe regret, and yet a further shore awaits past the limbo, after eons of separation. A hope of healing action that can only be felt once.

A matching melancholy in their eyes, their stance, and she is dead.

They are all dead.

Fog melting away. Sun in your eyes, you know what that means. The river was the lake, that was a dream. Having dreamed the river, you are remembering the lake.

“Stupid.”

Remembering what he said.

“In my honest opinion, Corry, stupid.”

It was only the truth. You failed everyone, not just your future brother-in-law. You failed Azeu, who insisted they let you in. Failed your families. Thousands who believed in you, taking out loans to back you. Cities riveted to the reports. Withouts at the games, beholdens, winning.

Three rounds, Garin’s insane duel, and now there is no equipment. They left it behind. Travel light, you said. Unencumbered. You made them hurry, they could have carried more but winning wasn’t enough, you wanted to set a record, meaning there is no crossing the lake. Your fault, losing the semifinal. Third place at best. All that exercise and planning undone by one foolish oversight. Do you deserve a second chance? Can you hold back tears? Will they ever underestimate you again?

Sliding, toppling, crashing down.

Tia is dead. Erwin was with her. Why? Why was he like her? Does he know you lied? Does he know the mountain was a river? Why can't he get past the colors? the numbers? his other issues? what did he say when you asked him? what did you ask him?

She must have told him.

Falling down. An empty space being filled by an inconceivably gruesome entity.

Your earliest memory is incense and a long white beard. You are six people, not one. "There can be no means of redress. Dearest children, at least I can see to your private schooling until full enfranchisement."

Your fathers and old Maris stood their ground. They died, they are dead years and years having used their weapon, having stood their ground. You know that makes a difference.

A pulling rush, the sky is a vortex. The five of you, which way to turn, what question to ask? "Will you look for them?"

The two pairs of brothers, Eric next to you. A pillar of smoke has brought a premature twilight. The flapping of coats is loud and sharp, like whips. Everything is gone, and will they look for them?

As you added "At least we found the door," trees behind you moaned in the unnatural wind.

Of course you thought of the four heroes saving the General's land.

Sights and sounds after your question and your tart joke. Your horse went for a straggle of calamint. Felt her movement with your thighs. Probably did it to reassure you.

Your best friend was there with your brother. He didn't know. Passed over the lake, the semifinal, and you betrayed him, you are still betraying him. Your brother, you guessed way back when but kept it to yourself, you never said a word. You never tried to understand.

The look he shared with Tia.

That was a dream. He took twenty-six. Two lieutenants plus twenty-four, which is divisible six ways. Twenty-six to lift the siege in color coded cloaks. To save the children, to open their little cages. Heal them with a touch.

Life, death, choices, contingencies.

Thirty thousand to one to reach the final.

You are waking up.

The door is shut. A square whitewashed wooden door. Shaking off the dream, you stand up and open it.

One two three tall strong men with bright hair. You know what they are going to say, every one. You preempt them. "He's gone."

They look down.

The low ceiling reminds you where you are. How did they get you to sleep out here? Will someone else move into his house? Will it be torn down?

"Four brothers remain." Eric is the only one who can embarrass you.

“What we mean to each other, let’s not.”

Aden hands you a hot drink. You slurp it, thinking about the sleeping. About what they are not telling you. Their long faces.

Your brother is gone past recall. You know why. None of the others do, and you will never tell.

Your cup is half empty. “I’m hoping we know what happened.”

Eric looks at Garin, who swallows as he brings his eyes back down.

“The duels and your charge removed the last remaining authority from the original group. They had to make the challenge to keep their status. The old boys who were in it to the end ceased to exist as a group. They each had their following based on—methods. On what they preferred in the life. The Venom. The heroes, the joke is they eat cobras and their underlings venom the poppies and hemp instead of watering. The fractions, though—they’re not units. The disaffected have a say, any semblance of central command is gone.”

You know the rest. “They regrouped north, in the flat. Wheeled right, nowhere else to go, if you think about it.”

Garin confirms it. “Some engaged the defense, others blockaded the town. Erwin left his people in the fight outside, or maybe the others never got in. They had no chance, and, we met a refugee train before we got to the fords. Hundreds are pouring in as we speak. We attacked, the bugs scattered—”

“They’re likely to head for the camp. Even those that wish to leave. Most everyone should be passing by the camp.”

The silence sends Corbin back to an indolent day after drunken debauchery, a nursing of the inner column.

“The camp hasn’t moved since yesterday.” Aden is looking near him. “Nor have the numbers changed.”

The other two also look.

“Some course of action has been agreed.” Corbin fights a yawn. “I hope my sleeping here wasn’t part of this.”

“It was,” Aden admits, “though not in the sense of excluding you.”

“You can tie the vote,” his brother divulges.

Corbin looks at Eric, whose eyes proclaim loudly there will again be no straight answer. What happened to those two best friends? The hand on the shoulder, the sharing of confidences, of scant possessions, gone for good?

“There’s no stopping them,” Eric announces. Was it ever really there? “I give them a day before they look Across. Two days later they’ll be here.” Corbin’s eyes bore into him. “They can crush the valley five times over. With the tunnels compromised, we have no way to intervene, or target more than a few fractions, allied for a day.”

Corbin leaves the empty cup in an alcove. “Except the camp.”

Three nods.

“We’re attacking.”

Three heads turn.

Mulishly ungiving, they wait for Eric to explain.

“There is a means of destroying the camp,” he utters with the greatest reluctance. “It was only brought up this morning.”

“While I was sleeping. I see. I can tie the vote, he said.” Corbin looks at their legs. “The hopeful one has a plan. You two are against.” It was Aden who told him to sleep in the Big House. “No, the objection is his.”

Again the pregnant silence of long faces.

Aden opens his mouth and it comes. “Below the camp is an ambe-makka bomb.”

Corbin hears his own breath. Ghostly tentacles stretch forth. Tempted to look over his shoulder.

“I emplaced it a few weeks ago.”

The dust has settled.

“You two are in favor of,” Corbin fails to evade the ugly word, “of defaulting. Only the Dancer is against.” Senior Dancer is obsolete.

No comments on this outrage.

“I slept in. Insomnia would make it worse. This is our day, not yesterday. Erwin is here by not being here.”

Four friends fill the hallway. It occurs to Corbin the others are expecting his ruling will exculpate them.

“You made your pledges to the mayor and the girl. If this is your

responsibility, who am I to, I have no intention of interfering.” Hands, insides up to his teeth, shudder on recalling the dream monster. They wish to set loose one just as hideous. “I could never do this. I can abstain. The Classics knew next to nothing about the, the stuff, and you, what, studied it, during, life underground?”

Aden nods. “That’s when I made the bomb. I tested it during a storm.”

“So we hear nothing.”

“The girlfriends, Wim, I had to be safe. Also, having knowledge doesn’t imply using it.”

“You’re proposing—”

“That other options have been exhausted.”

“Argument without reason, plan without beauty,” Garin fires away. “When you were testing it, did you blow up any pigs?” And Corbin laughs. A dare aimed at the insatiable maw.

“I could never do this,” he reaffirms. Why bring up Wim?

Garin nods. “Two two.”

“No.” Head shake. “I abstain. Two one one.”

The bomb maker speaks softly. “Two one one means it passes.”

They can almost hear each other’s heartbeats.

“We’re not the unit we were. We never had trouble deciding before.” No one asks Garin before what. “We never had plurality decisions. You’re voting to pervert beauty.”

“Make a suggestion,” Eric replies.

“Attack.”

“We die,” Aden declares. “Achieving nothing.”

“Without having defaulted,” Garin answers back. “Without turning into people I despise, having taken for granted that everyone did.”

“True,” Corbin concedes. “All true. I seem to have missed the debate.”

“You seem to have changed your mind.”

Corbin thinks he understands Garin’s rancor. “Tell me what would’ve happened if I’d tied it.”

“Other people would’ve lived on in a different world.” Awkwardness ensues from Aden’s infringement on the younger Mananson’s former province.

“Abstaining is not against. Erwin,” eyes on Eric, “he was a safe bet to oppose such drastic action. Two one two doesn’t pass, fewer in favor than not. Corry would be needed to swing the vote.”

“Like I said, changed his mind.”

Willow leaves like nubs of coal in a tarn. Like tears. Evening shadows enfolding a tapering glen. “I changed my mind far back. Do I manage to pity them? Maybe I do. Maybe I’ve moved on from despising them.” Looks at Garin’s torso. “I also pity these two for believing power translates into contentment. Let alone happiness. Erwin could’ve changed his mind. We’re four, not” seven? More? Could have been twins. “five. Two one one does mean it passes.”

It looks as though he has more until his head is lowered in acquiescence.

“A few people might fit in the guest quarters,” Aden says. “Is there anyone you”

Head shake.

Eric waves down the hallway. “I suggest the front room.” He wonders again about the thick walls and the various other precautions. Or why each bedroom is different. Aden is behind him, a simple head turn—but Corbin’s stony reserve makes Eric hold back. He can trace the awareness of it to a sulky morning on the mission north. So much has happened since then. How did it begin? Where did it all go wrong?

Li is waiting in the front room. Aden sits beside her. As the others lounge around the table, she whispers something. He shrugs it off.

“What about Nissa?” Corbin asks Aden. “And her partner.”

“Asked them. They said no.” Produces a curious-looking device from a bracket embedded in the table.

“Maybe it should be me.”

Aden hands it over without a word. Eric turns the thing around, looking, touching.

“I twist the knob thingy?”

Aden nods. “To the right.” Eric and Garin look at him. “To the left would’ve been a mockery. I...”

Still looking at him.

“I was teaching the twins self-control. Vim had a bite on his left shoulder. I

told him to”

“Push it right,” Corbin finishes the sentence.

Aden nods. “Then Wim went outside to try and get bitten.”

Although no one is looking at Corbin, neither can he read their thoughts.

Certain no one ever felt more self-loathing, Eric turns the little knob. When this brings no immediate result, impatience subsumes unease. Eyes wander around. Leaning over, Li whispers again. Aden acknowledges her remark in the most perfunctory way. Trying to summon the conviction of his clifftop epiphany.

A tremor is followed by a deep rumble.

Again.

Another, fainter.

That anything was felt speaks volumes.

No one makes a sound for the longest time.

Aden gets up to face the hallway. Hands Eric a lamp and goes out after him.

Garin lets Li through. Corbin comes out last.

Eric slides the door open.

Daylight from above. Worse than the debris or the stench is the horrendous sound, not nearly warped enough.

They begin their journey left and up toward the grimy patch of blue.

The gatehouse has been blown away. Eric scrambles over the blasted topsoil. The others join him as they finish the climb.

Five people stand speechless, feet planted in the soft dirt. Even after a

season of war, after the refugees, after Erwin, this is something else.

The sky having cleared in the night, a late summer sun blazes down on the very image of hell. The ground is paved with burned corpses. Trees are stark black skeletons. Berms have been destroyed, turning the valley floor into a turbid lake. Parts of city walls remain where the stone has fused together. The oppressive glare of sunlight is an acrid rain. Smoke is trailing along the ground. Li bends over and coughs violently.

Five pairs of eyes are open. Trying not to see.

“Time. Worlds I devour. I shall engage all within.”

The brothers hope Corbin will ask what he meant.

16 The Two of Us

The smoke has been more trying than the grieving. Their trek has gone on for hours since she noticed. They have done nothing but drag their feet through the desolation, sharing barely a look.

The worst is behind, however the silence is hardly a respite from the sounds. She knows that he is suffering, that his plan went terribly wrong. What comfort can she give? Stop, talk, touch his hair. Remind him of their togetherness, with the others gone.

The firmness of their friendship, the halting words at the parting. Garin asking, no one answering. “Not trying to find beauty, is that living? Be honest with yourselves, does that lead to happiness, to truth? Tell me those are the lives you wish to live.”

Eric shaking his head, turning away. Powerlessness.

She never would have believed it possible. Still felt doubts while she watched their backs dwindle. None of them turned as he stood beside her. Said they should pack, later nodded to confirm she was ready.

Nothing since then.

A brace of dead quails. A reminder of what they are leaving behind. They rest after topping an outlying razorback. A muddy pan lies ahead under a further escarpment covered with scree.

A year ago, when living was an innocent game of discovery, he asked her to bring six pieces of salmon and two pies.

“I never thought it would be like this.” Looking down at the mud caked with green scum. “I was sure I measured everything. I never...”

His hesitation. How much has changed.

“What I have done is unforgivable.”

Speaking again at least.

“Let’s try someplace else,” she tries after the lightest touch.

“This way.” Leads her around the edge to an upthrust rock, like a low wall.

“Stand over here. I can help you climb.”

There is no good foothold. Checks if a gnarly shrub can support his weight. Tightens the shoulder strap of his pack.

“You can take it off,” she says. “Then I’ll...”

Grabbing hold of a curving stem for support, stumbles. Looks at the wizened little cane in his hand.

“Oh.”

Stillness gives birth to sudden movement. Rockfall! They step aside.

A jagged, pitted shard flies off the slope as if thrown. Hits him on the knee. Lands on his foot. He loses balance. Falls on his back. Cries out.

“Can you, can you get?” Hand raised above his head. Lower leg drenched in blood. “In my pack. At the top. A box.” His breathing is ragged, his voice unsteady. An angular bulge in his pack. Ridiculously easy to pry out. Was it

making him uncomfortable?

Blood pooling around his head. A huge, scary spillage. His eyes, gray turned to blue in the southern sun, are looking in different directions.

The box is too big for one arm. Her having recovered it brings him relief.

“Inside, what, happened. Past, the past.”

Would have made any sacrifice in order not to hear that imploring tone.

“Finished. This morning. Needs, to be known. So this, so this, never.”

Waking up together, arms around each other.

“Never happens again.”

No talk of recently departed friends.

He was the healer.

Should she help him sit up, should she have done so already?

Vomits, eyes closed, shaking, out of control.

“How sun where is where that.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Eyes taking turns to look at her. Surprise. “Who who where? Have we where have we met?”

Moments ago she was about to propose they discuss their future. Where they would go, what they would do. The daydream broke off with three adoptees, girls and a boy, icicles tinkling outside a snug cottage.

You’ll meet other people, the soft voice is unconvincing. *You’ll be fine on your own. You’ll remember him.*

The rocks have stilled. Her sweat has cooled. Shadows are swinging toward evening. It feels like moments, but too much time has passed. An hour or more. Signs of life are a memory. Hopes for recovery have crept past.

He *was* the healer.

“Farewell, wisdom lover.” A light not of the sun is in her eyes. “Farewell, hoping man. Every touch was like the first.” Brings his hand up to her lips. “The memories are worth the pain.”

The day has been more cloudy than sunny. Li’s neck hair feels warm once more. At the bottom of a ravine, trying to decide her way.

Back to the Underground Palace, is that what he wanted her to do?

Pouts her lips, trying to imagine the journey. They had trouble opening the door. Closed it from outside. Maybe she could squeeze through the dining room window.

Say she got in. He only ever taught her notetaking shorthand. She could teach herself, how long would that take?

Is there any food left? She could bring more. They had prepared it and hers would spoil, she would need to go out every so often.

How she scorned that boy’s offer to teach her dogsledding. Yirua. “My friends call me Yee,” he said.

Goes up the western side without looking at the brush or the slanting walls.

She can do it. Clambering upward among moss and lichen, refusing to acknowledge her negligible cuts and bruises, every step proves effort brings success. She can get in one way or another. Learn the signs. The food, the remoteness, arrangements can be made for both.

Only this time, she would be there alone.

Is *that* what he wanted?

To bring someone there.

Her fingers on the bark of that alder as they were about to meet. Grass tickling her feet. “The pie is good. The fish is good. You too.”

Challenges, difficulties. A future better than the past. “Never happens again.” Blood running down his face. “I can’t hear,” when she hadn’t spoken. Did her words reach him at the end?

Shunned by survivors after their ascent.

So shocked and racked with guilt he welcomed death.

Li turns and looks at the green below the blue. Up at hovering hanks of yarn.

His smile before she entered the room with seven doors.

As the night of winter raged on for months, midnight sun shone on the two of them inside. All that bickering among the others, the bedroom game, the doors left ajar. The assault of new clothes: the Dancers, the girlfriends, the young helper.

The last room, their own.

Each day was a gleeful fire in her cheeks. She would go to sleep hoping to wake soon, as dreams could not keep up.

When he took her hand and led her downstairs, Li thought she would die of excitement.

“In here. Take the door to the right.” Wavy motion. “The others in order.”

That look between them, that completion of her when she smiled at him and opened the door.

Inside was nothing but other doors. Opening the rightmost, she walked into a painted forest.

A puddle with waterlilies, overhung by leafy beeches. Streamers of light. A cloud bank cut the sky. The only movement and sound were hers.

Was the second room the same? Looking closely, she could see it was painted, a rendering of the first. How lifelike—hard to believe she was imagining the movement.

Missing details were a clue as she stepped into the third room, the veins on leaves, or lines being too straight.

The third room was neither inauthentic nor less enchanting. The little things were not lacking for want of skill.

Each was a buoyant tribute, an honoring of the previous, and of the original. She raced into the fourth room.

In the fourth room, each leaf was a single stroke.

In the fifth she almost fell through a hole in a matt blue firmament. Shapes were gaining freedom from their anchors.

Flushes of color suffused the sixth, sea green, yellow, off-white. Trunks and roots were merely hinted.

Sat on the floor in the seventh, mouth open. A diagonal divided the violet from the purple. The puddle was a burning sun on the floor, or was it frozen over? No, it would be an insult to try and describe this. Near or far, one or many, none of these words could mean anything in the seventh room.

Drunk on colors, got up, went outside, outside again, hugged him, kissed him, went back in.

A lizard pair reemerges after having fled at her approach. Li shares a crumb of her biscuit, a piece of cheese, a third of a fig. Ignoring the rest, the bigger lizard latches onto the fig and brings it to the smaller, who eats the parts sticking from his mouth. She shares the two remaining pieces. After agreeing on which is whose, the pair set to with discreet looks.

“No raisins,” Li tells the lizards. “Sorry.”

Sore and winded, she can feel herself ageing. After a long break the strain is still there. The scenery looks familiar, though she has never been here before. Sights are no longer new. She is no longer new. Children of the future depend on her experience and accomplishments. The unborn will suffer unless she warns—

whom, of what? And how?

Drawing instead of writing.

Teaching.

Tries to imagine lands and seas, generations trading places. To always be alone because of this knowledge, this duty he left her?

The Waif Widow. A nickname Garin and Corbin might have given her.

‘I should’ve helped that snail,’ the last thing Garin said before leaving. As usual addressing everyone present.

A cairn was beyond her. A sky funeral seemed disrespectful, lackadaisical. She rolled him into the mud, pack and all. Thought about a blanket shroud, almost heard him asking what purpose it would serve.

A few bloodied stones followed. It seemed important.

Ropy fleaworts hide the lizards as they sluggishly skitter away, having rested from their meal. Li’s hand moves along a grass tuft until the tips are scratching her palm. Elbow, slick with sweat, is on the backpack.

A loved one’s advice is like having them, who told her that, Ekks? She wasn’t half bad when she wasn’t playing seamstress with the other four. No wonder everyone liked her.

Nearly all the clothes had been left behind. Ekks’ spangles, Nissa’s inexpert pleats. The time they put into it, the effort, the unflagging talk. The one subject on which even Erwin was animated.

Believes herself to be seventeen years old. That achievement has slipped

through her fingers. That she has squandered her gifts. That it's too late.

Leans against the pack to stand up. When it rolls over, the box partly slides out. No matter. She is four feet from the fall.

A long line of animals, two dozen or more, each the size of a house. Li turns to watch their stately passage.

Flattened grass where she sat, and where her pack lay.

Water in the defile.

The pack moving, now fitfully, now smoothly.

Disbelieves her eyes before realizing what is happening. Oyster plants poke out from underneath, a brown and blue bouquet. Next to them, wooly thistles shake from their recent release.

The taller weeds are pushing her pack away.

Spriggy necks unbending, fennels, yarrows, harebells.

Sets the pack upright.

His box is missing.

There it is, on the very edge. Two inches hang over. Leans forward, extends her arm. Too far for a good grip. Her touch only pushes it farther.

As she is stretching her legs, the box tilts and vanishes.

“No!”

Jumps down onto the treacherous plants. Sticks her head out to look.

“NO!”

The slope allows her to see the box, but there is no getting it back.

Resigned himself to death, at best. Never welcomed it.

Water sounds louder than before. Sunlight on her nape feels warmer than before. Part of her is lying flat. The rest is spinning and tottering through a sandstorm.

Their crimes were less heinous than was in their power to commit.

Procopius

17 The Sunlands

Deep inside of me, a blue ball is rolling around a black carpet full of stars.

Ages elapse as I float. My growth is inward, yet the core remains impervious. Does that make me an aberration? Will I devolve into a contradiction? Should I hope for change without severance or cessation?

With a quiver, the blue ball obtains a cap of white. The carpet is that much darker.

Can I be irreducible? Can I be at peace? Can I voice any question?

Can I wish for harmony?

Sunlight is dyed and scented by countless apple-leaves. Tendrils of hawthorn bushes command the undergrowth. A rock shelf juts from a tangle of bracken, forming a cave entrance. A young woman is standing on the sill. Sticks her head in every now and again, but something is holding her back.

The cave is emitting a series of peculiar wet sounds. An oily plop followed by a satisfied grunt. Scraping with tuneless humming, simultaneous but untogether.

Torchlight is playing around the cave mouth, especially to the young woman's right. Turning her back on the daylight, walks into the limned dark.

The river's rush diminishes.

A narrow opening leads to a brightly lit chamber where the sounds are coming from. An older woman crowned with white curls is painting the walls. She has seen to a large area since her former apprentice's last visit. Great game is shunted leftward and downward by human shapes picking apples as they go. All rather crude, admittedly only in outline.

Higher up, chips of shells and sparkling ores set into nooks and crevices in the rock wall.

She began with the stars.

Ebui knows she could never produce Mnaa's lifelike constellations, even working under a night sky.

This does nothing to redeem the ugliness beneath.

"Nobody paints stick figures in Aggal." Though it begins as an apology, belief lends certainty to her statement.

Mnaa is adding a few strokes to the hooves of her kine. Larger than life, ten times the size of the people, each animal is detailed with loving care. Looking at her work, muses "Who feeds them all, I should like to know."

"All the rivers flow there." Ebui's stars are her ardor, her eyes, her lithe figure.

"Aggal is inland," the artist declares. "Aggal-in-the-Hills, it was called. Their people supposedly eat seeds. Gathering them is hard work."

"Grasses stay in place. Cumin, bulbs and so forth." The visitor points

through the stone wall. “Apples. Haws. Cattle stray.”

Orange fire plays on the former teacher’s skin without touching the crisscrossing lines. “Thousands of people in one place. They eat the land bare.” Eager to refute, nodding black eyes have turned to amber. “Others bring them food from far away. That is why they eat seeds. Animals would die on the way. Or eat more than their worth. Fruit would spoil.” Hopeless. Youthful dreams survive the morning light. “They say that in the west there once lived people who ate not at all.”

The student looks at the teacher. “The Sungazers.”

“They believed it was demeaning to eat, that food consumed the body. That meals hurt and disabled the mind. Then a winter age came. Our forbears had to eat to survive. We hide from the Sun. Summers end. Childhoods.”

Ebui is looking appreciatively at the sculpted stars. “Aggal is away from the Sun. To the north and east.”

Mnaa turns around again. Many will listen to this nonsense. Many young families have moved out already, north down the river, or south and west over the prairie. Beads and statuettes are in fashion while painted caves languish in silence.

“Up south by the lakes,” she says, “the Sun comes full circle. It’s cold in the summer, warm in the winter. Their stars are different. Water drains the other way too, left, down, right, up.”

Everyone wants more than their share.

Is she on the cusp of a far-reaching insight?

Her critic is not done.

“They say one can climb a peak and watch glaciers melt. New lands open every summer. They are opening now.”

“Will the ice never return? We here, tell me we can eat all that our Dazee supplies.”

“Timely come her bounty,” Ebui concedes the proverb. “Have you heard of anyone returning? I haven’t. They say a lifetime isn’t enough to see all the great rivers.”

“Our great river no longer amazes you.”

Standing near a cataract, column of water hurled into whorls of spray—
unthinkable anyone could wish they were someplace else.

Does Ebui dream of a private grave? People in fancy dress eulogizing,
laying down their offerings. Or does she dream past the frontier, a quicksilver
cavern to adorn forever?

Contrary to her own advice, Mnaa flies inside the hollow hill. A womb for a
people. The ceiling entrances, hundreds, thousands. Lights of many colors shine
on her as she holds a fine fragile vessel weighing next to nothing. Can there be a
womb for the world? Is that what she was thinking?

Maintains “We are the true home, the first origin.” Pines for the knowledge
of what lies between stars, what goes into that blackness.

Vapor above a gloomy forest floor. Dew coats stone, leaf and shoot. Water rolls and drips. A finger threads forward and down. Daylight lints it.

Forward and down, inexorable, intrepid, the rivulet crawls onward.

A morass builds up in a rift valley. Birds gorge on the grubs. Herons pull their feet back up from the mud. Up and sideways is their movement, an occasional glance cast behind or above. Always watchful, never safe, they spear the toads for a few short years. Robins dart in between without colliding as stagnant water fills up the valley.

A speck appears in an unbroken field of white. Snakes and thickens into a long line of people. Scarves wrapped tight, bundled up in furs, babies pressed against parents, the gigantic centipede advances. Gales howl, armed with sheeting ice crystals. Nothing can stop them.

Few words are spoken in the column. Squalling children are pacified with soothing sounds and rocking motions. A gasp is granted less often, either someone falling by the wayside or the friends and family removing clothes and weapons. Although faces give little away, memories are the heart's most cherished treasure and mementos are kept up and down the line.

The gray cloud cover fractures. Winter people cast wispy shadows. Shaggy heads exult in the veiled Sun. Its rays bend, stretch, hide again.

Color steals into the world as rue breaks out from encasement. Splashes of purple crocus and yellow primrose presage the spring. South and west, as the spiky wheel arcs behind a thinning dome. Away from death, toward the sunlands.

They pass spoors, stunted thorn trees and, on clear days, eagles high overhead. Waters teem with leaping fish. Families and entire tribes veer off. Groups of friends seek freedom, adventure, the world's margins. Many more come down from the snows, strapping people whose campfires burn long into the night.

A river goes over a precipice. An air current grapples the falling water and sprays the ground. As the snow begins to thaw, the meadow reawakens. Smaller courses braid away or link up when they find a channel. Floes smash against boulders and roots.

A gully gashes the greening landscape. A knot of winter people are taking their leisure up top. The gurgle is the Sun tearing down mountain walls, a promise of life out of unforgiving chaos.

Some sit down to better relish the scene and having made it this far. Fallen rain is resurrected west by southwest, hazing the noontide. Hills and plains look twisted and uninviting, unlike gaps in a blue range to the south.

The water's steady tug dislodges a wooden box from its resting place. It

spins and skids before surrendering to the current. Too smooth and even-sided for driftwood, a red haired watcher follows its joggling progression until a gorse thicket hides it from her view.

18 Jade Ax Heads

*I allow dewdrops to fall
From the blossoms onto the fields
Which inebriate my soul.*
Nezahualcoyotl

The day is full of promise.

Scattered groves hesitate before the forest envelops him. His steps are sure,
the young grass pliant. Apex sunlight streams down through oaks and elms.

All is well. He need only look at the trees. In the season of inspection, good
planning means there is no fault with his work. Logging scouts will take note.

It being the woods, having no neighbors. Somewhat of a fault according to
his wife.

The woodsman stops under a tall birch, one of his favorite trees.

No. Goodness is everywhere, from the yearlings to the cloud base. As
butterflies diffuse lingering bad thought, buntings sweep up the residue. The
woodsman breathes deeply in the shade.

He should check the riverbanks.

Heavy rains are weeks away.

It does need to be done.

A reasonable plan for two or three productive days. Sound thinking. Lost in work, guard down, carries on toward the river.

Leaves glitter in a sunburst. Grass makes short work of his footprints. Sandy walls avalanche. Ants swim out undaunted by losing precious cargo.

The woodsman passes curve after curve upstream watching the high water marks a foot above the surface, gaging for overflows. A chore for the turning of odd seasons. Squelches diligently through the silt, hoping to save time for a hunt. The water reaches below his knees. Boots are hanging down his back on a string made by his wife.

Takes a closer look wherever action may be required. Goes around half-submerged boulders with birds taking off or landing. Ferns droop from the drier stones above. Birds look down suspiciously. The loudest sound is the lapping at his legs.

The Sun overtakes him, swings down, leaves him behind. Looks up and around. Enough light for a hunt.

Weights a pheasant against a grouse as he makes for the bank.

A hare.

The waning afternoon, the drying clothes on the grass beside him, wings, shanks and leftovers.

He could go downstream tomorrow for a hare.

Standing up naked—on freehold, miles from anyone—sees he has nearly walked into a beaver dam. Would have hated disturbing the builders, allies against the floods. A little bark for them, next time work takes him here.

Uplands draw his eyes. Trading caravans may be on their way across the prairie.

The wide world, and the caravans.

In a few more years of cautious forestry his family should be able to afford passage with one.

Four years. Five means trusting strength against mischance. The sky is cerulean, wide open. *Six, seven, what is that? We are young.*

Eyes fall back on the beaver dam.

There is something in it.

Could that be natural? Could the beavers have crafted those angles?

Shades his eyes.

Looks to be a box.

A set of jewelry—but how did it get there?

Most likely empty.

Such a lovely box must have been meant for valuables.

Having jammed a fallen branch into the riverbed, tips it to support the dam. Noting the beaver kittens' wary attention, hopes the branch will help grow their dam and their tribe.

Dry again, reaches for his shirt—before his arm wends toward his

acquisition. Could be missed by a caravan and looked for. Traders may know it was tampered with. Might have opened it anyway on his own, but his duty is to his wife.

They rest on tender young grass, drying in sanguine sunshine.

The box's beauty changes after dark. The polished hardwood and the elegant proportions are tempting on the huntsman's way home, but family is family.

The wife feels unwell on his return. Sets the box on a shelf above their bed, thinking to tell her the following day.

Soreness having caught up with his thighs, quickly falls asleep. The Moon sets. The box soaks up starlight on the shelf, reinvented again, yet timeless.

The Sun travels over it, rising behind pallid tatters. Moon, stars, a third day dawns, blustery but again full of promise. The box never leaves the shelf.

On the third day the wife feels better, enough to walk about the house and grounds in the daylight.

Her husband could not have placed the thing there at random.

Spends the piled up gardening groping for words.

Nothing she says that evening can make him agree to open it. Her arguments are as flimsy as his and she does not insist.

For two more uneventful days no one touches the box. In short speeches in

mornings and evenings she again brings up opening or moving it. He always reminds her of their initial conversation, when he had gotten her to agree they would wait and see what a caravan would offer for it unopened. In the young trading season some would surely be passing by soon.

Successive sunsets weaken this position, however she forgoes the issue. Recognizing her husband's attachment to the puzzling box, Fey thinks it more worthwhile to trade this concession for other gains.

On the fifth night after finding it, sitting down to dinner, Matti speaks up. "You wouldn't want your box opened if it was recovered from a beaver dam. It won't be long."

Fey remains indoors as the trading company waits.

Two couples, one older, one in middle youth. Two mules and seven hinnies.

Invisible scales hang in fragile balance above the homestead. Between chores she has been sidling to the curtains to reappraise owners and animals.

She heard them while restocking the birdhouse. Offered refreshments first and sweetmeats later, never once setting foot outside. Very proper, and their looks she thinks were politely flattering.

Matti comes across signs of the caravan's passage. One meets all kinds of people. His heart is pounding as he hurries home.

Men idling can mean anything, but faces are friendly when they notice him.

Two women of corresponding ages. Animals in good order.

Fey hasn't stinted on their guests. Looks at his wife with affectionate gratitude as he leads them inside.

A sandalwood fire has been started, chairs arranged in a most welcoming manner. Fey offers a demure apology for not daring to let strangers in without her spouse's consent. The caravanners reply they would look for nothing less in such an entrancing hostess.

They turn out not insular at all but sociable. Foreseeing the qualities of both as travel partners, they actually ask the couple to join after the greetings and introductions. Rough arrangements made, the traders explain the finishing touches can wait, being a rare chance of entertainment on the road. Strong drinks are then brought out and guest beds made. The box stays on its shelf throughout the exuberant night and the lazing morning, unconsidered but unforgotten.

Lunchtime is at arm's length when they begin getting ready to set out. Although the mist has lifted, the animals' breath continues to steam. It soon gets stuffy under the trees, making them regret clothing choices.

At Matti's behest the party call at a farm toward the slow day's end. Homey yellow light is pouring out of the windows of a timber structure with two wings. The traders begin complimenting Fey, all four, the moment her husband's back is turned. Each has untold wonders to show. Pretending not to notice, Matti

descends into the farmhouse.

Two lychees and an apricot stuffed with salted shrimp later, resurfaces with a richly dressed older man. A desultory hug ends their goodbyes. The old man goes inside without another look.

She asks only to confirm the host hadn't changed before seeing him out. Their less considerate companions interrogate until being given maps. Unrolling these, they find them engrossing. Hinnies and mules clomp up and down the muddy path. Two couples on one side, a third on the other.

The woodsman points toward a low place in a fence and the party makes for it.

"My grandma's half-brother," reminds her. "His mother supposedly cheated my grandma who, you know, who was an orphan. Marked her maps. This happened years before my time."

Fey nods. "He's past fifty."

"Because my grandma felt cheated, she left the big house to live in our house. Where my mom grew up and, you know."

Fey had already guessed most of this. Gathers from his tone that the stop was made to settle the matter.

"I told him everything up to the salt marsh was his."

The fence is behind dark folds. Will he please go on!

"He offered four jade axes. I said we were family. He said that was reason to give me all four. We are the same, he said. One."

The skirling wind, the stars, the thin moon-horns. Hair in her nose and ears, sounds, odors, the sky tent's bulging sides.

“It seemed silly to add anything to that. He does have enough to spare. Seems a good man. Now we can be full partners.”

Has the world seen a finer night? Will another like this ever fall? A *pair* of jade ax heads means the caravan is theirs, the goods, the animals, the contacts, everything.

It means women and men to command.

To help with children while she—while they—oversee? Encourage?

“What you should do,” the elder tradewife is looking at the campfire, “is bring your box to this lady.”

Three nods. Fey and Matti wait for an explanation. There is no going back to the woodland homestead.

19 The Stars of Homecoming

The sea is glassy around a narrow moon-road. Sedges rim the water at the feet of a slim young girl. Other islands are impenetrable holes, each with a few burning eyes.

She is old enough to know about distress and injustice. Reasons people visit her aunt. That newborns could deserve death. That anyone could deserve sickness.

One look above makes pain an apparition. A dust mote. The stars are brilliant, numberless. Sailors say others shine south past the horizon. Seeing them would mean sailing the Sea and walking the Dry Land, and she has never done either.

As her calm poise reflects the tranquil night, breakers are foaming that only she can hear. Delay is waste. She must decide. Stay on the island and help her aunt, or look for the stars. Can she count them, describe them? Does anyone know how?

The world is darkness and light. The world is her choice.

Pilgrims' smiles are lights of their own. She has learned to tell petitioners' tremulous smiles from the smugness of thanksgivers. And though it makes her uncomfortable, accepts the reverence for herself as Young Lady of the Island. Smiles back every time.

To be Lady of the Island when her aunt reposes in the garden.

To see the stars in the eyes of strangers. In their teeth, their jewelry, in the gifts they bring.

To tend the berries and the squills, to join them, be them.

If she went to the garden, she could hear them grow.

‘Kindness reknits the world,’ her aunt’s words or her mother’s?

A peaches and cream complexion, a touch behind the ear, the tenderest caress.

A cool breeze is blowing through an opened door. Fresh air over water, around a rock, an island.

This island. Her home.

A part of it.

There is no deciding, only the search for truth. The fearless night is waiting. She should stand up.

It would bring the stars closer.

The sagess lowers a lamp onto a table. Many years past needing the light, handles the small object gently as though it were precious.

Tributes, loving salutes sheathed in ritual.

The lamp is a friend’s gift. The same can be said of the light.

Begins arranging the flowerpots and figured medallions on the table for

tomorrow, warmed by the fire and her memories.

The door opens faster than it closed.

Had sailors seen her dress flutter as she ran up the stairs, they would have commissioned odes to learn for their next visit. But they were counting the stars to their return.

There is very little space. Joins her aunt in looking at the day's presents, a diadem of shiny red coils and a silken scarf. A jar of remedies is in the way—she moves it aside.

The sagess knows that the more words there are, the harder it is to find the best. Waits for her niece to take an important breath.

“How can a light shine on itself? Does each star shine on the others?”

“The world is a ray of light. My mother always said there were other rays alongside ours. They spin and mesh together. When two rays cross we go through them, through those others, while they go through us. What we see in the stars may be the truth, common to all. Stars may be places where rays reunite. Or light may be the truth behind the veil.”

“The veil?”

“We see what's in the light. Think of an overcast. Whichever stars are hidden from us shine on hundreds of other shrines. We each trace our own homecoming.”

“How do we...” The forehead wrinkles. The aunt doubts anything can rival sharing secrets with this nascent goddess. “How do we know about these

others?”

Hears her mother answering the same questions forty years ago. The curious daughters looked down at the twinflower covering the ground, pink and white petals poking out of buds. How fresh seawater tasted back then.

“Wet ground in the morning means it rained while you were sleeping,” begins as her mother had. Weak. Wrong. Her niece is older, a woman soon.

“Patterns we see today are the simpler patterns of yesterday. A hatchling from an egg. A sapling from a seed.” They have been facing the fireplace. Presently eyes rest on each other. “A woman from a child.

“For the longest time the patterns intertwined before the Elder Sister awoke. The first to perceive this, to ask the first questions. How did it come about? Maybe light shone on itself, or each ray on its neighbors. Maybe the past was the pregnancy for this birth. Maybe a ray went through something, through an eye, or through a crystal.

“How do we know? We explore. We ask. We find neither flawlessness nor fullness, try as we might. Between arrival and departure we see only a small measure. We can look up or down, not both. The northern stars or the southern. Although the Moon is round, she changes every week.

“We can never be aware of all that there is. How, how can we imagine a world short of balance? Others see what we miss. Their patterns are no less subtle than ours. If they haven’t yet awakened, they will in their time. We fill the voids in their world as they fill those in ours.

“Friends around us, we can teach them, raise them so they awake. So we grow together. When they suffer we can nurse them back to health. We can find ways to honor them. Think what bees can achieve.”

Scorn for grave builders and their standing stones is on the tip of her tongue. No need. The niece knows her views on this.

“Is it better to stargaze from higher up? From a mountaintop. From a tree growing on a mountaintop.”

“I suppose. Shouldn’t that be earned? Climbing a mountain would be harder for them. Something should be given in exchange.”

The niece needs to think it through.

Sputter from the lamp startles them.

“I wish to show you something.”

The girl’s eyes stay on her aunt as she pulls something out from under her bed. A biggish wooden box. Its shadow joins the jig on the walls.

“Why not sit here on my bed?” and they do. “A pregnant couple brought this when we were too young to remember.” Raises the lid with both hands. It makes not a sound.

Muscles move under smooth skin as the niece leans over for a peek. Removing the topmost contents, the aunt spreads them out on the bed.

“They are signs.” The niece holds the corner of a leaf between two fingers. “This is fine, is it skin? What is it?”

“Or a weave fused in fire. In the sun, maybe. Glued, treated with something.

Hard to say.”

They breathe, and the lamp sputters again.

“Someone made this. Look how much trouble they took for each sign. Look how closely spaced they are. Dozens of these squares are inside.”

After another look both turn away.

“Clams and tree rings witnessed profound upheaval in the past. The women who left these signs are gone. If you wish, if you must look for the truth far from this island, then, then let me give you this box.” The aunt’s voice is huskier than usual. “So that you can leave your own. Your own truths.”

Night and day, the hearthfire and sailing ships, you and I—which is which?

The morning sun is a dim luster behind the clouds. They fill the north and east, with a sea wind shredding them southward. Sky’s blood is melting away, pockets of rose already gone to purple.

The sagess is down on the beach, waiting for the boat. Hasn’t slept a whole night through since her niece left. The swishing of oars was a welcome invasion of her dreams.

The boat lies heavy in the water. Two men rowing, a woman half-sitting aft. One look tells the sagess what she needs to know.

A tiny head crops up from the bow. A matching hand shields unclouded green eyes. Another pushes the hair back.

Fallow hair like the woman's. Eyes. Forehead.

The men ship oars. The woman turns the tiller. The boat slows before a bouncing stop ten feet from the beach.

The mother attempts sitting up. "May she stay?"

The sagess stoops and smiles, so as not to frighten the child.

"I could never let you take her away."

One of the men carries the girl ashore. Holds her chin up for a look, touches her ear. Turns back to the boat.

The sagess scoops wild strawberries out of her apron, sweeter than the lips of remembered lovers. Cups the little hand and they tumble in.

"Dear child." The girl looks up. "Fear nothing." Sunlight slashes through to wash over them. "Nothing at all."

Deities rotating in this universe under grandiose delusions can in no way compete with the Supreme Person of Godhead, for innumerable universes and their inhabitants are brought into being and then annihilated by a simple command from the Lord.

Bhagavata Purana

20 Pigeon Steps

“Anyone else? Last chance.”

Surf and seabirds. The crier surveys the crowd. The charioteer taps his side. It disturbs the donkeys.

He mutters to the crier.

“Plenty more down there. Six, for the day’s biggest, six!” She raises the three middle fingers of each hand.

A collective shudder smudges the chatter. Six rings for a pearl is a fortune—though it would need to be quite the find. The day has seen a fair few first waters. One got four.

“I’m going in.”

People move apart.

“Who is it?”

“Torrens.”

“It’s Torrens.”

“Who?”

“Rell’s husband.”

“Hasn’t he gone in already?”

“Who is it, we can’t see.”

“Torrens.”

“Torrens again.”

“He got a two.”

“I think he got a three.”

“Three I think.”

Crowd noise splinters the talk. Torrens believes himself sufficiently rested. Two dives in one day is hardly unheard of. The young man’s aplomb earns him both admiration and mockery.

Salt glitters on the diver’s hair, his shoulders, his eyebrows. The charioteer looks him over.

“He is asking how much you already got.”

“Five for two.”

“Five rings for two pearls,” translates the surprise. “And you want a third.”

“Tell him he has many rings in his chest. He wants more, I want more.”

“There are many villages, he says, many young divers.”

As Torrens smiles, lode lines of salt crack and crumble.

“Many *wish* to be like me.”

When this is translated, the charioteer pats the front of his beard.

“He says to wait.”

A second shudder spreading, wind ruffling hedgerows. He is going for the chest.

“He says, a ring for you *before* you dive. He says, who wants more, deserves more. Or, if. If they want more, they deserve more.”

Although the crier repeats ‘if they want’ a third time, it remains unclear. The glitter of bronze is abundantly clear. Envied more than the five Torrens got before by the many who never dared to dive, or got a lower price. He has done nothing to earn it.

Torrens hands Rell the ring. Nods. Dives into the light chop.

Clouds are herding, solidifying. The Sun is a carrot between them and the dunes.

The pearl broker turns to the interpreter.

“Beginning my journeys from here means I can plan better. I must be certain it will be worth my while.”

His four superb donkeys, the people he has brought, the chariot itself.

“Waves, no diving. Hot or cold in the wrong seasons, only seeds. You must share a part of my risk.”

The statement about wanting and deserving was meant for her alone.

To open the man’s ledger every year. Heading here straight from the Delta. The pick of the trade goods. With herself at the heart of it—doing what?

Training up Lins, Torrens, Inna, making sure the village has an army of divers.

Torrens will be up soon.

To invite brewers, to join at their round tables. To wipe the beak after her drink, to pass, to accept the next. A bronze napkin holder, next year golden.

Dive before he is here. Before he is underway. Why not, if they work

together?

Can they help spread the clams?

Neighboring villages might claim them.

There has never been a shortage of shoreline.

To walk along the coast.

Along the high points before the last descent to the waterline. The longest journey with dry feet. Counting steps.

Even better, counting pigeon steps.

Two women and two men from each village. Take the middle of middles.

Two measuring from their village, two from the other.

The longest journey from where?

From the village common. Or from the biggest house.

No need to go that far. Nearest undisputed clam bed.

It would only be a problem in border areas.

Disputes, bigger village should concede to the smaller. Always?

Why the longest journey? What would the shortest journey mean?

Needs looking into.

Torrens' fist is closed around a clam. Rell sees it first. Brings her arms together.

Coveting mars the strident acclamation. The broker knows the best finds are not the loudest.

"Look how big it is."

“Such a clam, a two for sure.”

“He got another two.”

“He got three before.”

“No he didn’t.”

“Yes he did.”

“Only my sons got three.”

“No they didn’t.”

“No.”

“No they didn’t.”

“I got three.”

“They did, I was paying attention.”

“Only your sons can swim.”

The crier turns her back on the laughter. She can make it work. Devote a winter to it. Nothing to lose.

The broker says, “Not in sixty lifetimes could I get used to this wind.”
Rearranging his shawl to keep away desert grit, making ready to go.

Postponed arguments resume in the dispersing crowd.

Torrens walks up to the crier.

“Rell and I have something to show him at our house. He can spend the night if he wishes. Fresh cut grass for his donkeys, and we’ll take care of all his helpers.”

As the crier takes a breath, Rell puts in,

“Tell him we said donkeys first.”

21 The Plural

*Once you depart,
Be it for the farthest hills,
You will find your way.*

Matsuo Basho

The morning sounds wrong.

About to open her eyes. The world is a smell or two past the comfort of her bed. Animal noises and shouted conversations have a deviant timber, no question.

A late sleeper and the city not truly her home, though she has picked up enough rhythms to worry about this undertone. Something must have happened during the night.

Being a librarian, not knowing upsets her.

Listens carefully as she puts on her work tunic. Window shows only the neighbor's wall, no need to bother.

Goes through the door. Blinks in the sun. Once more the truth is clear before eyes can readjust.

Everyone is leaving. Everyone.

Gaping doors and windows. The main street clogged with carts, wains and

barrows passing from sunlight into street shadows. Toddlers desperate to help struggling with packs and bundles.

Despite the scale of the proceedings, a sliver of doubt. The Shardin have plagued the west coast since the spring, again, but they never raid this far inland. Those who...

Mouth dry, tongue grating.

Cowards fleeing from the very rumor of Shardin were leaving by the southern gates. These people are going the other way.

A fountain is the place to go for news. The thought puts her on edge. The prevailing opinion, as opposed to the law, is that only natives and their servants are entitled to 'public water.' On the other hand, she is a fairly respected librarian.

No time for such niceties. Heads for a fountain, turns a corner.

A small group leaning forward, pinched, focused. Recognizes no one she likes and estimates the others' backgrounds, but they break up just then. Each man gives her a once-over.

The speaker sees her look. "Shardin and Shekelesh," shouts by way of an introduction. Pieces are falling into place.

By her side, grabs hold of her arm.

"A second fleet to the south, more than thirty ships. North and east is the only way to go."

"North and east is small towns, then the desert."

His grip tightens. “Nowhere else is safe. Is there someone who can look after you?”

“Yes, there is,” she says, meaning herself, pulling back with her elbow. His sweaty hand slides down to the wrist. She wrenches away and hurries toward the main street.

The times she laughed at the fools taking to the road in search of ‘shelter’ or ‘safety.’ Once she leaves a city gate she is a refugee herself.

First, the library.

Studies faces as she fights dense main street traffic. The few she knows by sight are intent on staring past or through her. She will never get there if she keeps this up. Brings her head down and looks for openings, lunging in before they can seal up again.

Her footfall is loud in the deserted library plaza. Stray dogs slink away as she walks up stairs, past tall doors, into cool shade. The human river is a far-off drone.

A snuffle jolts her to a stop.

There it is again.

From her boss’ office?

Holds her breath.

No, just that one sound. Rolling her eyes, makes for the head librarian’s office.

The door is open, letting flies and dust in, formerly unimaginable.

“Zib! Ziiiiib! Oh, Zibbiiii!”

The boy offers a shoulder as the pregnant teenager lurches to her feet.

“Gone, he is *gone*!”

The abject wail told Zib old news. Things are missing from the shelves, miniature masterpieces kept under lock and key.

He would take nothing so bulky as lots of writing.

Frowns as she reminds herself of why she is there.

“Zib?”

Looks at the pregnant girl, the head librarian’s stepdaughter. Princess. The boy, too, is looking up at his sister.

“Can we please come with you?”

Please. “Come with me?”

“Please, you’re so clever, you, what, what can we do, where can we go, I, I know that, I know I’ve always been terrible to you and, and please. Please? We will both do everything you say. Everything, please, can we please come with you?”

One way to answer would be going out the door. The boy’s mute helpless appeal, though—she would lose sleep over it.

Takes a breath.

“If we bring the commentary, that means leaving the other poems behind. All those tablets.”

“What?”

While Princess has overlooked the plural, the boy's expression has changed to something like hope.

"We need food. Dry food, water and walking shoes. Before that, I need to do something else." Clears her throat. "Pick something up."

"Why not go to Babylon, I'm sure we'd have the best of times."

Azure above, tan below, a ghost of a track in front.

"I told you why."

"I forgot."

Early morning before the heat has set in. A grayness near the horizon could mean a river, or it could mean anything. It better mean something. After six days their water is running low.

"I forgot," Princess repeats like a reprimand.

Zib stops walking. The siblings follow, less abruptly.

"Do you think I need this?"

The pregnant girl looks genuinely perplexed.

"You. You. Do you think I need your endless stupid questions? That I need to know what you used to think, before? How it used to be. Your thoughts on, on, on women. Do you think I need your *never* doing *any* work, just like at the library? Do you think we made some binding lifelong contract? Is that what you think?"

The pregnant girl slumps. “I’m sorry. I only, we wanted—” looks to her brother for help. The boy’s eyes are fixed on the ground. Her hand goes up to her belly and she shivers, close to tears.

To think she was being groomed for leadership, that Zib would have ended up taking orders from her. Possibly from her temple child. Between that and exile, the choice is clear.

“I never liked you. Your vanity, I laughed at that—‘my bracelet, my earrings, burnished, look, look.’ This neediness, expecting others will solve your problems—”

Shakes her head, turns and continues walking. The boy motions to his sister before hurrying along.

“Has your stepdad ever told you which people came first? Was it us, do you know?” A distraction.

“Stone people came first.”

Encouraging interest.

“They could never build anything because of earthquakes and, and fire mountains. They lived in caves, and they made their own. They entered through the ceiling. Their way was down. They believed the world is our mother. They left us thunderstones.”

“Good. And then?”

“Then copper people came from the west, from the last river. They made dogs out of wolves and foxes. They entombed their dead, they didn’t burn, or—have sky funerals. Their way was forward. They entered through the front. They lived in houses, and they made bread in ovens. The weather was good, or, always the same. And, and, and, they had copper tools, so they could live alone. A family, not, you know, not everyone in, not everyone that’s...”

“Not a tribe. And then?”

“Then bronze people. That’s us. Our way is inward. We have iron, from the Hatti, but we’re bronze people who learned the iron. We cook food, and we store it, and, and our kings fight duels. Not, not, not—melees. Because we tell them what to do.”

“Good. Very good.”

His ignorance remains as awful as his inability to say what he does know. This history recital was for Molosso a long, hard speech.

“Now tell me about the iron.”

“Hatti,” he reminds her. She nods twice. He frowns.

“They, their people used iron before anyone else. Hatti and Miya-Mii-Miii-Mitya! And others. They, iron, with, charcoal is, less good than bronze, but, iron is, is what, easier to find?”

“You tell me.”

“Or there’s more iron to be found. So, so battles, were melees again. Because lots of people had iron weapons. And tools. And they harnessed

donkeys, and they went in every direction. Their way was outward.”

“Their name was?”

“Can’t recall.”

She holds up a closed fist. Opens it. “They went in every direction.”

“Moniru! North of, of Elam and Mellek. The Hatti are the Moniru who came to where we lived. Where Aggal was, before. How could they keep iron to themselves, when we had bronze? So we lived side by side for generations, smiths and charioteers. They lived in our old home and we lived in our new. When, ah, bad things happened, everyone started fighting, the sea people came, and—we’re now refugees.”

“Refugees,” Zib confirms, looking toward the horizon. Sweat is trickling down from her temples. “What happens when you seize your enemies’ land?”

“They seize your own,” he gives the correct response.

A limpid canvas is stretched over a bleak wilderness behind them. Their water is down to mouthfuls. The country ahead is green in addition to drab, showing glimmers of dew. They are resting on the last rocky slope.

“Our Lady’s refrain.”

“Alas, my destroyed city, my home nevermore.”

Princess is still throwing up the dried fruit they had for breakfast. A better time to tell him may never come.

“Molosso.” Too formal after what they have been through. “Mollo.” He looks up. “Your sister.” They lean closer. “The baby can hardly thrive. It may be

stillborn. She's eating nothing. Drinking nothing." Eye contact of honest equals. "She knows this." Mollo jerks his head away. Twelve or thereabouts, a handsome man in the making.

"Everyone was going north, or north by northeast. We could never go that way. Two women on the road, we had to, I went, I took us east, almost due east. We only need a house, a gourd of water, to keep looking.

"Mollo, you wait here with her. I can go and explore. There has to be something nearby."

Sees him nod. Dry heaves resume.

Zib sees the funeral, walking back.

Decides it must be a funeral when Princess turns and the belly is much smaller.

Keeps walking, waiting for them to notice her. She had meant to shout and wave her loaf. They will eat it near the body, and drink the milks she is bringing. What distance will they have put between themselves and the funeral site as they meet the help?

Lu's headdress is wrapped around something she handles very carefully, very gently. The little brother is keeping a polite distance.

Ground beneath Zib's feet is getting rougher. Must look down to pick her way.

Those hand movements have opened her floodgates. Sympathy is pouring in. And yet—Lu has never mentioned the war. Zib’s family put to death, her city razed, the library pillaged, on a pretense. Eight years, not a word.

Zib’s favorite poet once wrote life’s cardinal delight was a cool drink after one offered to a friend visiting your family.

Your home.

Friends, family, home, delight.

Skirts a patch of loose rock.

“The hands on my son—what he touches turns to lapis.”

“That sounds very nice.”

The proud mother nods. The murmur is notably dissonant. “I taught him the old way, you know. To respect women. And he does.”

Heads turn back to Princess, who responds with a smile. Someone wants to know if her name, Lukalla, comes from *lugal*, prince. “Is that why she calls you Princess?”

Zib catches an unwelcome eye or two. They rebound quickly.

“She calls me Lu sometimes. Princess is her teasing, because I act like it.” A modest seeming blush. “My name makes that easy.” Village women could not be more impressed with her social grace. “And Zibbis, you can call her Zib, she was so kind to bring us along. She was marvelous. Without her we never would’ve made it.”

Zib gets up. "Thank you. I'll go check on Mollo."

"Good." Princess turns back to the women. "As I recall, you have two sons as well."

The exhilarated victim is nodding. "Born son and adopted second cousin."

Outside the crowded longhouse, a sickle Moon ornaments a cool starry night. Children are milling around the public space. A burly youth is teaching proper posture for a kestron throw. "Hold out your hand like this. Feet planted like this. Back straight, look. Look at my back. This here. Down here. Like this. Then with the left hand you pull out the javelin and load it. Loading is hard. We'll practice that tomorrow. Now you lefties, look."

She finds him near the construction site. A shadow rises between the old palisade and the ditch below the hilltop. A lattice of canals, white on black, marks the extent of village grounds.

"Left." Wings flap. "Left." Dry grass crackles. "Right."

Announcing which way the crumbs will go. Parrots have learned the words, and monkeys have learned to take their cue from the parrots. But sometimes he throws the other way. Parrots then change direction in midair; the flying monkeys can only turn their little heads.

The day's work on the new wall is done. Women have brought food, drink and gossip. There is flirting on both sides and coarse male laughter as they mingle. A voice calls out, "Tell your friend to stay."

"Will do."

People are dissociating themselves from the shouter.

The boy turns. “Hey Zib.”

“Hey.” Smiles.

“They asked me too, if I was staying, or if we were all staying.”

“They mean staying for good, not a few days’ rest.”

“Huh. They think...”

When he has nothing to add she explains, “They think we can live in a village. They think we’re lucky to have them. And they’re lucky to have us. Have you heard about this Curator?”

He has. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Someone who looks after property. Valuable or sensitive property. A librarian does that in a way. I feel we should pay the Curator a visit.”

Afire with wonder at her suggestion of a fresh adventure. Hearing his animal friends’ impatience, throws them the remaining crumbs.

“I was thinking of that echo in the empty library, how we both noticed it.”

He is glad to be reminded. “What they said, you know, how we should’ve rested during daytime. On our way here. So that our water would last longer.”

“Go ahead.”

“If there was a pothole or a village, we would’ve missed it that way.”

“A shame there was nothing to miss,” with a solemn nod. They share another smile and go on talking about the sights they have seen, and about the future.

The three travelers are finishing a sumptuous late breakfast in a shady corner of an herb garden, among groundhoppers and buzzing bees. Soft-spoken words drift around the House of Kindness and Remembrance. Its owner comes into view preceded by his perfume, accompanied by their village guide. Zib notes both making eyes at Princess.

The Curator is a stocky, aging man with a habit of smiling and scratching his nose. His manner is somewhat too genial for Zib's liking.

"I trust you enjoyed your rooms and slept soundly," he opens.

Three nods with Mollo leading the way, mouth full.

"May we join you?"

"Your food, your table," Zib points out.

"You are my guests."

"Uninvited guests."

"Not unwelcome." The pair sit down. The host nibbles on a piece of honeycomb.

"Have you had time to give any thought to your plans?" says at last.

Mollo speaks up. "Where's the nearest city?"

"That would be your former home. Sad to say, cities are scarce in these parts. A few villages like the one where you spent the night before last.

Throwbacks to old irrigations. Most of them are smaller, if not all."

The guide lets out an approving grunt. Zib thinks what hard work it must be, the upkeep of their oasis. Their basement burials.

None can read. None have ever written. Men aren't at the helm, though.

The boy keeps looking at the Curator, who smiles and produces a wax tablet. Using a fingernail, sketches a wavy line forking at the top. "The merged river, its mouth." A snick below it. "We are here, ten days or so on foot if it wasn't for the mudflats. I wish you the best of luck getting past them. North and west," a jagged line in the bottom left, "hills pile up to the highlands of Elam, a country with few cities. Could the sea people strike that far? I think not. I must add I thought the same of your city." His eyes darken. "Take this lesson from my own home. The impregnable Hattusha is a smoldering ruin. We could have withstood their onslaught if anyone could. None can say the strongest walls will still be standing by the time you need a razor." Setting the tablet down, looks at his guests. "Rest here for a time. Turn your backs on the chaos. You can always leave if things settle or if you change your minds."

"Without the chaos you could never exist." Zib turns to the guide. "Neither could your village." Looks at the woman's callused hands.

When the Curator's eyes smile, skin around the corners of his mouth crinkles slightly. "One rarely meets a young lady whose wisdom so belies her years. In a time less fraught there would be no need for my collection. True."

"The village can grow," the guide cuts in.

"Not much," the Curator counters. "Fresh blood takes twenty young

women, not two. Fresh blood means one fine distant day. Fifteen years for the little soldiers to grow, to learn the spear, the kestron, obedience, initiative, endurance—taught by whom?

“Say no one hears of this. Say no one reads the threat. Say you win. Some bring home more spoils of war, others bring less. Some spend their nights deciding what to wish for. Novelty is wealth. To the children novelty is the only wealth. Having things, we pretend to have the truth. Build our own tombs, stuff them with riches.” Having finished the honeycomb, sucks his fingertips. “Once again, the best of luck.”

“What are you suggesting?”

The guide nods following Zib’s question.

“That we swim past the maelstrom. That all actions are voluntary. My late wife believed this to have held true at one time.”

“Kindness extends to all, for we each have an enemy within,” Zib repeats the words engraved above the gate. The widower beams at her. It occurs to Zib he probably talks to his things when the house is empty.

Princess stretches her arms and legs. Four eyes wander off again.

Probably addresses the wife, then ends up talking to his exhibits.

“You have horses.” Zib draws everyone’s attention. “If I can have whichever one I want with its tack, I’ll donate something for your collection. More remarkable than anything you’ve shown us. A voluntary action, like you said. A kindness.”

Looking down, Mollo mutters, “One horse.”

“Not my chariot.”

“Only the tack.”

Donkeys let children sit on their backs. Mollo did laps in the plaza every overnight stay. Why not a horse, respectfully dismounting when anyone is sighted?

The three pairs of eyes.

“I’ll take my chances with the chaos.”

22 The Sage of Seleucia

*What good are laurel wreaths on gray hair once nubile girls can sense
their mothers spurned us?*

Herman Wildenvey

Doors are propped. Stewards walk in and out. They open windows, light lamps, sweep the floor. They freshen up the room by removing cobwebs and scrubbing out stains. They bring in trays of food and drink. Within an hour the table is fully set for twenty. During wartime, the rich board would attract envious stares if anyone could look in: outside is the river. The dining room looks very cozy when the prop is removed and the doors swing shut. Cliques of luminaries appear shortly thereafter.

Conversations continue as groups fragment around the table.

“... on account of which hermeneutics is an ultimate advent—their little secret doctrine—there can be no higher roost.”

“... runoff, literally flowing, think of the clepsydra if you will, then movement, continuum...”

“... na-da, ma-pa. Side by side. Nnn-da, mmm-pa. A transition. A twinge. I trust you heard it.”

The noisy inn is reasserted each time the door admits arrivals. Talking

points coalesce as the room fills up. There is a sense of going through the motions. Not all are in a debating mood every time they meet. This pervasive apathy, coupled with familiarity, cuts the sparring short.

Roving eyes rest on a young man no one seems to recognize.

Xeno lays a hand on his shoulder. “I induct Demetrios. Asrina’s disciple. She has a delivery with malpresentation.”

The young man greets the graybeards and matrons with a nervous nod. They set about introducing not themselves but one another.

“This is Simoas, a stargazer from Ecbatana.”

“This is Ksaku, a poet of Colchis.” She bows in turn. “A dreadful poet,” someone adds. A squabble ensues (“Your mother is dreadful.” “Was indeed dreadful,”) allowing Demetrios to slip his question.

“Regulars introduce others?”

Xeno leans over. “All that can be known is the existence of your mind.”

The young man fails to make head or tail of the dictum.

“Hither body houses Luvio of Phrygia, a mathematician.” Smiles.

“Here sits Tarsos of Rhodes, a thinker—albeit a skeptic.” Smiles all around.

The roll call exhausts Demetrios’ capacity for memorizing names and careers, though accents and sartorial cues do help.

“Finally, *this* is Xenarchus, the Sage of Seleucia.”

“We are all sages of Seleucia,” Xeno replies without a trace of inflection. Outside, a nanny goat is complaining about being in a rowboat. “Or ought to be.

And we have plans to make.”

A shudder runs down the young man’s spine. The Republic has been pushing the Greek kingdoms east and south for a century, with some thinking the tide can turn here at the meeting of the rivers.

Some, not all.

“The smart money’s on absconding,” suggests the man who introduced Xeno. His name might be Athanassos, or is that the neighbor? “What’s this to us? I strongly doubt everyone here is foursquare behind the war effort.”

An accusation of treason? Surely anyone living in the capital must abhor the vulgarian Romans.

“You doubting,” Tarsos offers, “is akin to Barri having a drink.”

Eyes fly to one holding a cup to his mouth. The resulting mirth strikes the young physician as sham, like people joking about their illness.

“Romans,” Tarsos goes on, “are more spartan than Sparta. Coercion is their highest virtue. What have we to set against that? Words. Not everyone has the patience for words.”

“That we stop there, I think no reason,” an Easterner picks up, could be the stargazer. “That Greeks and Romans are the same.” Demetrios feels a pang of guilt for assuming his accent was a lisp. “That my city has a thousand year old library when you come. That we have peace before you come. Not since.”

“Not *us*,” Xeno declares. “It was Alexander, who conquered kingdoms for amusement. The measure of a person is what it was. As his heirs were destroyed

by hubris and greed, so the Romans too must show disunion after their conquest.”

Mewing gulls prompt a follow up.

“The Romans would—*will* be at the gates riding snailback before we reach consensus. Where we stand dies with us. The unborn will seek the truth on their own.”

“Or whether truth exists,” Tarsos puts in.

Xeno nods with the air of shoosng a gnat. “How can we lessen their growing pains? This might be a question for us to try and answer, us Sevens and Ones, sages of Seleucia. If we deserve the name.”

Tarsos takes a break from the obscene fondling of his salt and pepper beard. “Steel is tempered in fire. Making that attempt, I call it transgressive. Claiming to act on behalf of the unborn. Indulgence is a form of abuse. Moreover, the past demands respect no less than the future. I am at peace with myself more than with Homer’s—piscatorial imagery, yet I pay for the odd copy as a wedding gift.”

Faces turn back to the most senior, the most correct. Xeno nods acknowledgement of the deference. “Consent is out of reach. We are too fond of defending our views and finding faults in others. I should hope that we here have acquired a measure of respect for the other side.” His eyes travel down the table. “Sides. Let us take this with us. The companionship of complements. Let the Sevens codify wisdom. Let us Ones try and deny nothing. Let none deny

anyone's contribution. Collation can stave off excess. It can provide discipline, and balance."

Ksakku raises her head. "Was that a reference to Zoroaster or to Serres?" Xeno's smile changes to a frown as she adds, "We can make no mark if each follows their path. In the West, Aristotle is highly regarded."

Several attendees take deep breaths and sit back.

"Aristotle."

Even Demetrios has known him to lash out.

"I spit five times on his fifth so-called element. Heat and cold. Movement and stillness, nothing more. There is no 'fifth element.' Analysis to the atom. Synthesis to oneness—the magic is the unity. The shared. The common. This the selfish fool misses, presciently looking out his small window." Checks himself, waters his wine.

"You mentioned your nephew's namesake," Tarsos points out, meaning Alexander. "Would he not have failed at something, somewhere, had his tutor been so irremediably wrong?"

Could they be goading him?

"He did fail." Xeno's pronouncement stuns the room. In the popular imagination Alexander is equal to the gods. "Had he not failed, this city would never have been built. Not as a Seleucia. As for his tutor: pah! That reason, a product of training, can outmatch instinctive compassion, what madness.

Wisdom may be attained," looks at Tarsos, "if at all, yes, yes, if at all, once we

question the selfsame uncertainty he praises. That women are inferior because he prefers men. That the brain cools the blood, the organ nearest to the Sun—I ask you. Ideas like this will be held to due ridicule before long, or my name is not Xenarchus.”

“Instinctive compassion, as of children. I thought for years that your name was Xenophiles.”

“Children and animals. Maybe plants as well. More fool you.”

Bargees hail one another over the water.

After a period of eating and drinking, a woman’s voice, quiet but suave.

“Reason does tend to fail, set against feeling. Tyranny. Sloth. On the other hand, your view is based on ‘what if,’ as is everyone else’s. Have you addressed this, truly spoken to your audience and not the choir? The mutual appreciation is good—like most people, you line up your rivals on one side. You ascribe a cause to them. You blame them for dissenting.”

Nods recall a frisky wind in a copse. Some are grudging, others more enthused. They are not really discussing the war, which is why Demetrios is there, in order to keep his mentress up to speed. The Romans are said to be in sight of the Euphrates.

Doctor Asrina has family abroad. Will he be going with her? Is that expected? He should ask.

He should ask someone else.

What would she be saying if she was here?

The tense dinners at her mansion, the sardonic exchanges between the spouses, the mutual mistrust. A journey of any length would be unbearable.

Voices rise in song through the shut door.

The city's austere gridwork layout resembles an army camp. The Easterner wasn't entirely wrong. The Macedonians had perhaps been more Homeric than spartan, ennobled by their simplicity and yet corrupted already by Greece ahead of the opulent East. How will the Romans fill their scroll of history?

Physicians should prosper among a martial people. Latin is similar to Greek and Sanskrit. Or get an assistant. Someone's daughter.

Or son?

Or son.

Xeno stirs on his left, nods, turns to Tarsos. "It would be exciting to know the first word ever spoken. It could have been..." Only Tarsos and Demetrios are within hearing. Other conversations have resumed. The major business seems to have been settled. "It could have been the name Africa. Blessing, bliss." Swallows. "Ancestral singularity. Genesis. A good solid name, although names only take you so far because oftentimes, nothing else will live in memory. Only the name."

Tarsos inclines his head. "Possible—*maa*, *mbaa*, life, death—parent, child, having, the had—maybe, maybe—I think it takes two to make a word."

Demetrios is ashamed to ask anything as ignorance might reflect on his teacher.

Summer night with the Moon nearing full. An island hill above farmland and cordgrass which stretch as far as the eye can see. Atop the sole hill, soapstone walls and an unassuming citadel sail through the ivory light. A few lamps are lit in the less savory suburbs below.

A spare old man holds his hands together at the pinnacle of the highest tower, forearms resting on the stone ledge.

His brother was a magistrate here, but he is dead five years. Like yesterday, running after him, wrestling, swimming, poleboating. Always losing to the taller, the stronger, the leader.

Never begrudged this to Crateros. If anything, Xeno thought he had it better. He was the brighter child, reader, confidant, adviser. Once his nephew Alexander had grown to command, the trappings of magistrature were reduced to ceremony.

Five years. What is a single death in the senseless waste? Slaves, refugees, thralls. So many voices beside his brother's have been silenced.

Stars twinkle away. A statue of a man above the sleeping city cries out in anguish for the fallen populations, for his doomed compatriots and the victims of posterity. What has the vigil earned him? Is his empathy empowering or is it an illusion?

If only the Roman army was illusory. Closure has brought detachment and clarity. The gatherings of thinkers had been meant to bring back the trust and

friendship buried with Crateros. Most of them were content with one-uppance, merely playing at seeking the truth. The plurality of outlooks was tainted all these years, indignified, by self-centeredness. The brothers had never held anything back from one another. There could never have been any jealousy between them.

The birds, the confluence, the stars.

Is he devoted to truth? Or is that more wishful thinking?

To ensure his body's survival, to escape, to remember the wrangling symposia.

Truth.

His bedroom faces south. Moonlight is slanting down on two objects Xeno left on the bed. One is a dispatch confirming the Romans are bringing forty thousand. The other is a plain looking wooden box.

His two niblings. The two objects.

The truth is that Alexander can conjure up seven thousand. They were both afraid of twenty and convinced they could handle that many. Forty with siege equipment? No one could blame half their force for deserting on sight of the enemy.

The night birds' concert is loud and random. Evil can be transmuted into tragedy, loss into gain, temporality into deathlessness, by creating beauty. By siding with what matters most.

Old playwrights believed there was no other way. That beauty could not

exist without loss and suffering. That the one follows from the other, catharsis from nemesis.

Hittites used to put the torch to their lands and poison wells ahead of invaders, as was done in the prairie.

Bird calls bounce off the parapet coping. Stone shimmers with his head movements. The shrill singers are as unknowing as the slumbering citizens. No dispatch had gotten to either.

Nightingales might be saying their own goodbye to the city. The lyricism is transcendent, a rapturous promise of release from fear and anxiety. Xeno had always held poetry in higher esteem than philosophy. Would reason not ruin this experience?

Wind buffets his knuckles. The rip tide is changeful and permanent in equal measure.

He is part of it all for the good.

Having written his role, performing it is easy. That the play is a tragedy was never his choice, nor could he have changed it.

The Moon is silvering the flatlands. Xeno turns away and hurries toward the stairwell. A heady hope unlooked for is a slim but burgeoning beanstalk.

Some roads must be taken because there are none better. A tragedy, not an evil, because beauty can arise from necessity. What is a choice until we have to make it?

The corridors are carpeted, the walls hung with tapestries and paintings. A

little yellow light travels with him. The hot pressure of the undone propels him to action despite being old and needing sleep. Dustballs stir in the corners.

A servant is waiting in front of a door. Handing over the lamp, Xeno blinks to compose his thoughts.

“Two horses by the west gate. One saddled. Fast horses, but not tall.” Nods at the door, indicating the rooms’ occupant. The woman dashes off to make the arrangements.

A quarter of an hour later Alexander rubs his eyes, having sat up in bed. His name means People’s Defender.

“Forty,” his uncle says.

“Ai, ai, where?”

“One full legion has made a bridgehead. They’re bringing onagers.”

“Resistance is futile.”

Xeno sits there, breathing in the dark. Astonished by the uncle’s reticence, Alexander makes to shake off sleep, uniquely excited as his heart’s desire is being fulfilled. Prays without words, unsure to whom, to prove worthy of it.

“You see we must leave.” Is he stalling? “In opposite directions.”

Rustling sheets accentuate Alexander’s nod.

“Your sister has left.”

The bedding makes a louder sound. “What?”

“You must bring the knowledge with you.” Appeasing tone used by authorities trying to show a loss as a gain, a shortage as a surplus. “The knowledge is more than anyone deserves.”

“Who deserves the box?”

“Whoever carries its message.”

“But...”

“There are neither weapons in the box, nor plans. If there were, you would have no time to construct them.”

“If you told me about it five years ago? You, not the spies?”

“There are no weapons in the box.”

“You gave it to Irene.”

“I did. Before I woke you. She, is,” her mother reborn, “a better rider, more outdoorsy.” The daughter I never had. “She can take it far from any danger.”

“Do you have proof it contains no weapons descriptions?”

“Proof, no. It saddens me to hear you walk the path of denial.”

A single question remains before attending to his sinking ship of a city, full of people and tasks.

“What do you hope for, old man?”

“I hope pity and understanding help humans desist from self-destruction.”

A slight variation of his maxim. Unlikely the wording will survive long enough for serious thought.

The nephew begins to rise. The uncle gets up to leave, wishing his bedroom

was nearer.

Alexander has come to terms with his little sister galloping down an empty road. Irene does have a way with animals. She is nineteen, seven years younger. Surely Artemis will watch over her own.

“Uncle.”

The shuffling figure stops at the door.

“Do you still wish to see India?”

Xeno laughs softly midyawn.

“What the three ships are for.”

Sailing the straits, around Persia. Uncle and nephew on deck, talking freely, hands on the railing, undifferent from Olympians. The weight of government is sliding away. At long last he can commit to obtaining wisdom, to self-betterment. He will grow golden melons of the mind, die in peace—and never have the box. Not though the capital might be destroyed, not though the Romans might turn the world to desert.

He will never have the box.

Life is full of joy for us who call nothing our own.

Uttardhyayana Sutra

23 Egypt

Not the power to remember but its total opposite, the power to forget, is key to our existence.

Sholem Asch

A tufty meadow with uneven ground. Year after year, the Sun gives everyone a chance. Wild spinach and clover choke off the grass in places. Ferns thrive in the shadows. Flowers are spotted from the air.

Bigger animals pass without ever staying. A zebra putters past once in a few centuries. Although humans generally keep within sight of the river, a restless roamer might turn up on the rarest of occasions.

Inclemency mauls the countryside. Tough little roots battle it out. When the Sun calls, they answer.

A human family portends a massive inflow that fills the land. The meadow is a farmstead. Soil is ploughed over, stones are removed and buildings arise. A noise grows louder and louder, water gushing from a canal to feed the orderly stalks of millet. The family and others like them weed the tillage, bending over, pulling, straightening. Humans winning the short game means millet has relegated weeds to the fringes. A copious amount of water is needed, but the river always brings more. Weeds contract so as to have a chance in the long

game.

Farm life follows a pattern. The people like it that way. Not everyone likes it growing up; some move away while others find outlets for their passions. Years bring little change, only that humans have established rules for the plants and animals.

A subsidence leads to an upswell of dust, a cloudburst, flooding. Stricken populations leave homes which can no longer sustain them. The shock of scarcity leads to robbery, destruction, enslavement. Grain must be reaped early and tucked away for safekeeping. Each hoard contains a snake to ward off trespassers on two legs or four.

Violence is the new norm. Animals have been recruited for the gruntwork. Dogs keep watch for hyenas or worse. Men are in control, as women and girls must be hidden like the harvest whenever danger is expected. Inspired by women's spaces and rituals, men devise ingenious justifications for prolonging the segregation. 'Treasure' can mean livestock, produce or sweetheart.

In the outfield, where spurge still holds sway, a hidey-hole has been left without a snake. A repository for objects more precious than food. As these are few, the small space molds.

When the Sun returns for good, men of power impose order on the land. Freedom, happiness and kinship are all redefined. Cats having taken over crop

storage supervision, snakes regress to being feared and mistrusted. Their formerly venerated molted skins are disregarded emblems of a bygone era.

A measured tread nears the overgrown cache of valuables. Brambles are pushed aside so the cover can be lifted. Pale crawlers hurry away from the light. A package wrapped in oilcloth is added to the coins and weaponry.

The river is a lifeline through the desert expanse. Clouds are a rare sight. A cause to wake children so they witness nature's spectacle.

Fathers take grown sons to the treasure pit to reveal the greatest secret. Beyond history or guesswork, men indiscernible from gods left tantalizing messages from themselves and others.

As humans seize power and lose it to adversaries or to attrition, the right hand is exalted over the left, stabs over caresses.

A doe ferret rubs her itching side against a mossy rock. As she hops away, a creature smaller than a needle tip is left on the green cushion. It hatched different from a myriad siblings. Rising in late morning, glides until an owl inhales it.

The owl dies in the night.

Maggots breed in the remains, spreading the plague.

A single young woman is left alive on the millet farm. Having buried her family and the workers, she sets out for the town. Her father has money and weapons somewhere, but she is sick and tired of digging.

Weeds obliterate the helpless millet. They stretch across the field, the garden, the buildings. Mullein, teasel and mint have adapted best to the sandy soil. Bluejays nest in the ruins, preening as they watch bricks and thatch collapse, their droppings fueling the growth.

The river changes course away from the sphinx, the old mother lioness. Sunlight sinks behind her back.

South by southwest, upriver, after the Sun, past reeds, cottages and crocodiles. Sands have driven out the apples and hawthorns. The hills are sere and red, as uninviting as can be. A dozen mouths in the rock wall open on the painted caves. Neglected for the longest time, until a winter morning brings sounds followed by two men. Sporting full beards, they reek of sweat and hard life. Each is holding a torch as they enter. Figures on the walls give them pause.

One's Arabic is halting, comprising largely of formulaic phrases. "The most gracious and the most merciful," he intones. The other said God made the men who lived here, adding that their sons may wish these works undisturbed.

There is no running water in the caves. A furrow in the ground outside may have been a streambed who knows when. Not a drop can be heard in any of the chambers. The place offers poor prospect as an emergency shelter. More importantly, being near the paintings is discomfiting. The dry air has preserved the ancient art, each scene showing acts of affection. No war, no hunt, no wealth,

no glory. The presumption of free love makes them want to leave sooner rather than later. With many sites left to explore, they are bound to hit water somewhere.

Torchlight rakes the grand hall at the end of a passage.

Dark quiescence is reinstated.

Why not marry?

Struck and struck again, the crumbling earth coats his shoes. The October sun is strong, though not unbearable.

Have a home, someone waiting, with whom to share—what?

Intelligent women can be found. Cultured, enlightened women from good families.

Moving up in the world. At twenty-nine, an eminent scholar with a few youthful affairs.

An eminent *married* scholar.

A dowager.

Rejection is more appealing than acceptance.

Think about it.

Better.

Adopt.

In a few years.

Closer to acceptable.

Seeing maroon limbs in upriver caves he had explored years ago, Abdul al-Gizrawi looks at the four he has hired. One is excavating the remains of a wall. Two are clearing space around a storage dugout they found. Clods are breaking up in their hands, seeping onto the scrolls.

A grumbling thud breaks the rhythm of the sounds, which cease as everyone turns for a look.

“Wood.” The fourth. “I can try and clear around it.”

“Good.”

It could turn out to be another hidey-hole, or nothing. No matter. The one they did find and open looks full of Hermetic scrolls, the reason Abdul is there. An emerging authority on those recondite mystics, half Christian, half pagan. The few that know more are too old for fieldwork, or prefer the comforts of Cordoba and Seville to his skillet of a homeland.

“Looks much smaller than the one they found,” the man calls from Abdul’s back. His hopes sink deeper. It could be spices, or does he dare hope for jewelry?

Irrelevant. The one scroll he has examined is extraordinary. He has never seen another like it, and there are many more. Any finds shedding new light on Hermetic scripture will be very good for his career.

“Good,” tells the pair. His thrust is discovery rather than recognition. Plenty of time for dowagers. “There is room. Give me one.”

Lying on opposing sides of the trench, the two jointly haul up one of the

massive clay jars.

“Good. Good.”

They must have gone from chamber to chamber, looking at the embraces.

The women were clearly not subservient.

Clinking metal behind his back. “Old swords,” the man sounds disappointed. Abdul looks over his shoulder. Is that iron or bronze?

The two are getting up, dusting off. Steps back. Three scrolls have been crammed into a jar meant for one.

“Something else wrapped up.” The finder of the swords.

Effulgence tempts from three sides. His eyes stay on the scrolls. Threes. The Triple Wisdom of Hermes, the Three Ages of Man. Likely an accident. Having more scrolls than jars, they salvaged as many as they could.

To explore the caves with a woman.

“A box! A box was wrapped up. Lemme open it.”

“Open it,” just to say something. On one knee hears,

“Writing. Different kinds.”

Different kinds?

Turns to look.

24 Differences

Only plants had consciousness. Animals got it from them.

Dale Pendell

An aged dervish is looking at a vixen.

The windowpane shows a shaky likeness of himself and the salon. His guests have fallen silent after a fresh deadlock. Probably what emboldened the animal to edge near the light.

The vixen's head is turned toward a rabbit warren on the side of the house, tolerated and fenced at the dervish's insistence. He thinks it unlikely she can get inside. And what if she does?

Her brush is fraying.

"Yshpany," he says. "Rabbit. Hispania."

Behind him, many try to silence their eating and drinking and smoking.

"Possible," the northerner allows. "African pathfinders thought the rabbits salient. How?" Someone is having a coughing fit. "How can you? How can you prove it, like sardines and Sardinia."

One of the younger men clears his throat. "Naysayers should have the burden of proof."

The reminder almost elicits a smile from the dervish. "That does tend to

stymie us. Is everything possible or is nothing impossible? If patterns have an impulse for replication, is that more than—one more name? The Rambam may have the truth of it. I hope for a chance to ask him.”

His closing comment causes widespread squirming. Christians have been stripped of superciliousness.

A burning log cracks. Flames leap up.

Abdul al-Gizrawi turns to the salon. “The Parity of Toledo is an opening step. We saw it years in the making. Some saw it generations in the making. We see what must follow. Al-Andalus is spoken for. We had our chance here. We can never have a chance with the Christians. They must ascend to it of their accord.

“Rumi has endowed us with the poem *Sleeping in Cairo, Dreaming of Baghdad*.” A few nod. Others look around in panic. “A Cairo kiosk proprietor dreams of treasure buried in a cellar in the capital. He abandons his wife and children to pursue his obsession. Running out of money before he can find the house compels him to beg. This has been outlawed by the new caliph as the man was crossing the desert. The arresting officer confesses he too dreams of treasure, supposedly buried beneath the man’s own house in Cairo. The officer has never made the journey, knowing the real treasure is the staid life with his family.”

Lets that sink in.

“The poem applies to the Christian kingdoms. And to us? We too have lost

sight of our treasure. We are sleeping on my estate, dreaming of a city. What city? There has never been one. All these ‘holy’ wars, are we, how much better are we? Can we fault others for making the same mistake—or for anything?”

They hesitate to disagree. The northerner picks up the argument. “You are far above anyone else. Anyone, anywhere. I am truly humbled by this. You know I’ve spoken with traders returning from India and Cathay. Neither can compare with you. You are the treasure.”

Bearded faces nod. Smiling, the Parsi lets go of the jamb. “Let’s all then take ship for Kaladun.”

“Easy to say in front of the fire,” the northerner observes as the other is turning. “You said this was ‘very cold’ when I asked you. You would not care for a mild winter there.”

“Can you say the name again?”

“Caledonia.”

“In your language.”

“Alba.” Sounds of confusion make him add, “Scotland.”

“Skatran.”

“Aberdeen.”

“Abbadinn.”

“You manage not to laugh when I try to speak Arabic.”

Try to speak is a joke, many reacting accordingly. Abdul puts a hand on his shoulder. “Remind us of your point about responsibility.”

“I said it was different from freedom. Duty and choice.”

The dervish nods, remembering. “The Commentator fails us in this. You are a wise man, Kaladun.”

“Always and only inward,” the Scotsman quotes with a smile.

“A solid foundation,” the Parsi says. “An excellent beginning.”

While many nod once again, no one dares to continue the narrative.

“How can we bring the commons around?” Abdul asks the room.

“Illiterates, fishers, how can we improve their confidence, so they need only themselves?”

“Knowledge,” the Parsi suggests. “Give them knowledge. Minerals grade up to coral, plants up to the date palm, animals up to the ape, then you. Look around, we tell them. See the truth of this for yourselves. Symmetry and simplicity, beauty and variety, movement, recursion, life. ‘Give’ may itself be the problem. Too strong. Identity arises from experience, not from gift receiving. Kings and prophets begat each other. Engendered.” Shakes his head. “Let Sophia be mother and sister, mother and daughter, the universe embodied, or I’m sorry, what he said. Dead ends all. Reliant on a new book, or else on supersedable private revelation. Dead ends.”

“It must be easily grasped,” Abdul agrees.

“A circle,” the Parsi is adamant. “We can have no triangles.”

“What he said?”

“The Skatran. About Miryam.”

“The immaculate conception,” the Scotsman reminds them.

“If I may?”

The host nods at young Aziz.

“Astrology is anything but simple. Many pay the fools to read their fortunes in the stars.”

“So they do,” Abdul confirms. “And have done for centuries. A very simple premise. As above, so below. See the sky in a lake. The stars reflect on you. It provides a home. Explains your inertia. Shows where you belong.

“It occurs to me the night sky commands respect. Any sky does. One in possession of knowledge. Anyone does. Anything does. Can it be respect?”

“Can it be what?” the Parsi wants to know. “You are proposing respect as the terminus of inward movement.”

“Precisely.”

“No, that still leaves two. You and whatever it is you respect. Two at the very least, after you absorb everything else, friends and family, Earth and Heaven.”

“What about—?”

Abdul motions for the speaker to step forward.

“Thank you. I’m only—”

“A hafiz,” Abdul points out. “Perhaps the youngest here.”

“Sir, thank you, yes. Airing my thoughts, no more.”

The Parsi nods.

“I could say respect is the only pathway to joy. The object could be the wife.”

Abdul has time to add, “Or an adoptee.”

The Parsi has passed the pipe. “My young friend, I wonder whether you have spoken with many fishers. The only pathway to joy is a good catch.”

“Unless everyone else had a good catch,” the Scotsman interjects. “Who would eat all the fish?”

“Valid and reasonable,” Abdul confirms. “Respect is insufficient. I propose we consider charity. One of the Pillars.”

“They’re very similar.” Heads turn toward the speaker, a shortish man with an Eastern look to him. Abdul thinks he may have come with Abel Zachari. “I’m Amir ibn Ali from Korasan. I’m nothing like so widely read as y’all. I agree with Kaladun, y’all are the treasure. Charity and respect, though, I think they’re much the same. Charity’s the food, respect’s the flavor.

“Between India and Cathay lies the land of Tibet. A sage of Tibet, the Rinpochey Milarepa, said charity removes any boundary between ourselves and others. Our charity legitimates their existence.”

“Well spoken,” Abdul says. “We are enriched by your presence.” Ibn Ali smiles. “A way must be found to outstretch a person. Newlyweds and new parents have achieved this. Young children with pets. Find something common, everyday, not—philosophical, not needing explaining. Keep talking. I should make the rounds.”

They all speak Arabic well enough to follow. Will this too be lost?
Knowledge of the clean simple language?

He can hear the courtyard talk before leaving the salon.

“A fine scholiast, but vain. Unbecomingly so.” Apart from the voice, the tone is unmistakable.

Moonlight is spilled milk in the cloister. Zachari is pontificating from the bottom landing. His two listeners throw quick looks as Abdul turns the corner. Are those snowflakes? People probably told him whether they already had any.

“As for the Khazars, ‘unite or wither away.’ What I told them. And what I am telling you. Oh, hello Abdul. If only I could stay. My grandniece”

“And her family. I know.”

The two old friends share a bittersweet look. Zachari nods toward the salon.
“What are they discussing?”

“Differences, opposites,” Abdul answers. The two young men turn their backs and head upstairs.

“Parsi’s smokers in full spate, I imagine.”

“Others are holding their own. Your Ibn Ali made a fine contribution.”

“Glad to hear it. A good man. Married three widowed mothers. Differences and opposites, there may be nothing more.”

“I hope not. Things and the differences between, at least. Though viewpoints derive from geography, history, I think I got you to give up that fight.”

“You may have. Things and the differences between them are the same. How else can each exist? Reconciling this, no one has more power over you than you have over them. If they call for guards, so can you. Who has the power to do more than say, please remain firm. Try to weaken the collective as little as possible. Your example indicates your credence. Avers, affords, you see what I’m saying. There may be as many pairs of why and how as there are people. The same birds nest differently here and in the holy places.”

“In the varied sections of the great garden. Yes. Yes.” A rider outside. Good news, this late at night? “A strong collective is needed for a strong individual to prosper. Why differences and opposites? The peaks and troughs? Summer and winter, birth and death, this still bothers us. How can we not have moved past? How can we have failed to think of something?”

Zachari scratches his beard. “Have we failed?” Cheek. “We’ve thought of quite a few somethings. One all-encompassing convergence, that may have been overambitious. Overly hopeful. A sense of the numinous suffices for many. Not worship so much as reverence. The universe leaves much to be desired as an object of reverence. More accidental than flawless in my opinion. Therein lies an opportunity. I’ve never heard a serious argument against all being more one than not. All was planted in the same garden. We are too blinded to accept this. Too set in our ways, too truculent. Too eager to deride the uncongenial. Content to bicker about the ways in which the all has proceeded from the one. Does that matter?”

They hear the door guard pushing his chair back.

“Conduct, let me think, selfless, inclusive, more than—reverent, again please forgive the trudging words—this can be an addition to idolizing anything. Nations have families. The Indians believe in many worlds. Anything can be honored in any way. Time brings decay, but improvements do appear. Giving better fodder on holidays.” Shrugs. “It originated somewhere. The irony of the Parsi needing to spend more time with geometry.”

“Agreed.” Abdul opens the door.

The Italian guard points down the lane. “Condottieri. Compadres, companiones.” Abdul pats him between the shoulder blades with a nod. Zachari joins them on the doorstep.

The belling riders’ pace is at odds with the restful country ambience. It must have started snowing a while back, as some areas are under light cover already. Landscape is breaking up into black and dour white. Mushrooms in the nooks of tree roots are growing spiky tiaras.

“The garden image,” the rabbi says, “may be the best of all ideas. Again, we seem guilty of taking it too far. Messages, a legacy. In the action, surely. In any action. Can there be one best way to tend a garden, one best way to love, one truest cause for love? This many ways, that many causes? No. It denies any chance of improvement. It equates free will with submission.”

Abdul looks at his friend. “Submission.” The Arabic word is *islam*.

Zachari groans. “Too little sleep. The Parsi’s role model makes a fair case.

Disallowing any revelation whatsoever is a sinful denial of almightiness. Tell that to Occam. Anyhow. The Khazars will try and observe all the ordinances, they say, everyone's, and promise full freedom. You know how it goes. If opposing forces gain power—"

"They revert," Abdul finishes the sentence.

"And the empire implodes. Maybe empires must do so. Maybe life is truly a shroud, death its lifting."

"Twice from the same book, he must be coughing out his wine."

The rabbi titters. "My countryman is doing no such thing."

"The Gnostics may have thought of it."

"I agree. Heard it from a student perhaps. Some young you."

Recognizing his commander, the guard stands to attention.

"Would you wish that to be the case, with the shroud?"

"Wishing," Zachari replies, "I leave to children."

The commander raps out three words in Italian. Setting down his halberd, the door guard hurries inside. The other arrival walks the steaming horses to a manger.

"Sirs." A man of middling height, the commander is thickset, with a bullish neck. "A disturbance in the city. Not quite a riot. Tomorrow may be worse. We are escorting all your people here."

"All?" Zachari repeats with a tremor. They must have had good grounds for mounting such an operation.

“Whoever was at the boarding house. With all their possessions. No one was injured, nothing was damaged.” Turns to Abdul. “Sir, your estate is likewise unsafe.”

A nodding “I know.” His guests are filling up stairs and hallways. “We made plans for this.”

The captain nods in return. A brisk word with his adjutant, a sinewy younger man.

“We can continue by letter,” Abdul tells Zachari.

“By all means, my friend. No time to make the rounds. Let me see to my people.”

As Zachari disappears within, the square of light from the door frames the tough looking warrior.

“Captain. Can you tell me again about your uncle? The bookish one.”

An intake of breath is the only show of surprise. “Sir. Kind of you to remember. We have always had such, such, characters, in my family. His name is Gianni Lucceno. I was named Gianrocco for him and the saint of my birthday. An avid reader and speaker of many languages. He buys expensive books, reads them, writes letters. He does nothing else.”

“I would like to give you something to give to him.”

A nimble shifting of weight, a lowering of eyes. A man in his prime. “Sir, I could not go there now.”

“Of course. I meant, after you have seen us all safely onto ships and such.

After your contract is fulfilled.”

Shoulders back. “Sir. With great pleasure. I wrote to my uncle a few months ago. I took the liberty of mentioning you and the convergence.”

“Did you now?” An encroaching smile. “The gift is a box with some ancient writing. Neither big nor heavy. It would mean much to me if you could put it in the hands of someone you like, who...” Indoor sounds threaten to drown him out. “Let me go and get it for you.”

Talk is turning to teaching posts and famous penfriends from the world over.

25 Tsenter-shoot

Two people are about to meet.

One is in the driver's seat of a parked taxi car, a gunmetal Mercedes. Pole position outside the airport building, minutes after a touchdown. A Tuesday night in February, though. His mom roasted a chicken two days ago. Are the pickles still good? Hasn't gone near them in weeks.

A late night store on his way home from the downtown.

The incipient other person.

Not local.

Any number of likely destinations could top off the pickles with a bottle of wine.

The foreigner makes it through the incredibly inconvenient revolving door with two bags. Looks around.

Bingo.

Having opened the trunk, the driver steps out of the car. The client insists on handling both sizable bags. Fine with him. Busy dividing supermarket wines into price brackets, making a selection in each.

Starts the car after a series of pleasant metallic clicks. At the parking lot tollbooth, fishes a small piece of paper and a ten marten note out of his shirt pocket. As he is handing them over, the ramp goes up.

The piece of paper looks like a parking receipt on the security cameras. The tollbooth operator throws it in the trash and pockets the note. Her eyes go back to the Turkish soap opera.

“So. Verh voud you like to go?”

Eye contact in the rear view mirror. International clients always sit in the back.

“Ah, Split, number six Spinki-kayva street. Or, Spinki-keeva. Number six.”

The driver thinks for a moment. The younger man is looking at him expectantly in the mirror. “Hosspsial?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Hostel. Thanks.” The client sits back.

The driver tries to conjure up a reason for a young, fit man to take an airport taxi to the hospital—eyes dip down onto the dashboard—at ten PM? They might admit the Pope. Possibly the country’s president. If with the Pope. And if she had a bleeding ulcer.

“My frhend, you come to visit somevun?”

Client looks away from a dumpster diving old lady with a flashlight taped to her forehead. “I actually came here to play soccer.”

“Sokrh?!” Driver’s eyes light up. “Foutt-boll?!”

“Sure. Football, fútbol, yeah. It’s all good. I, ah, played tight end as well, in high school.” Broad grin of a confident young man, at peace.

He what? A medical before signing a contract. The club would have sent a car even if he’d missed a flight.

Early, unannounced maybe.

Speenchicheva number six. That's not the hospital. That's way down by the retirement home.

Billboards and crass storefronts are flying past. Thirty years' experience in tire repairs. Floral services, tasteful arrangements for every occasion. 'Reasons why you're cheating on me with someone else behind my back' by a folk singer with a mustache. Turbo Trixy, a female folk singer with Grand Canyon cleavage.

Red light. The sign says Kashtel Lukshich, Kashtel Suchurats, Mravintse, Zhrovnitsa, Podstrana, Split. Driver feels somewhat incongruous right wing pride when he catches client gawking at teenage girls. The crossing troop's outfits and hairstyles are near-identical.

"Vie hossipal, my frhend?"

"It's where I'm stayin,' ah, Begoy Riviera."

Driver hits the hazard lights and stops the meter. Thought he had it. This time there can be no mistake. "You arh saying hostell? No hossipitaal?"

Client nods.

"My frhend. I em sorhy. No hostell inn det strhit. Hossipitaal is inn det strhit. I tot you said hossipitaal. Det place you said, it's no voarhk, pfff... no voarhking who can say? Frhom summerh. Dey finish voarhking ven summerh finish."

Raises a finger. "Only vun hostell inn Split, it's bed place. It's chip place. It's place forh pipple vit bekpek, vit no money. Pipple on chip airhoplenn. No forh you, you come vit norhmaal airhoplenn. Hostell is forh pipple go inn bus, no inn

tuxi. You need place to stay, I find good place to stay. Good, end, no espensif. Split, it's chip city, don't vorhy, Split it's no espensif. I find five, six places to stay, little morh espensif end no so much espensif. You see vot is how much end you say diss vun. You say."

Green light. No traffic. Governments have had two postwar decades and counting to build an overpass. Previous Communist governments, more than four.

Restarts meter and car. Controlled movements. A peek ahead. The mirror. Back and forth.

"My frhend, you, it's no prhoblem. Forhget hostell. Get aparhtment. Verhy chip, verhy good. Everhy place verhy closs. No much drhive de place to de place. To see vot is how much. Maybe inn same house trhee aparhtments. Vun vit balcon, vun vit morh nice tings, vun no balcon, no verhy nice, verhy, no verhy much nice tings, end it's chip. Listen, no prhoblem. Sevens, eight—no, twelve minnits beforh Split. Time to tink. So much places to stay. So much aparhtments. No tourhism now. Inn summerh, no much places to stay. End, you come like diss, you hev prhoblem. Everhy aparhtment it's full. Just espensif hottell. Now it's no summerh. Now it's Christmas. Eh, now, yesterhday, one mount two mount Christmas. Now zeema, now called, you verh jucket. Now, no so much sun, no mosquitto, nutting. Now pipples vit aparhtments forh tourhism, dey do nutting. Vun milliyon pipples inn Split inn summer. Now ten perhsent. Now my frhend, so much places to stay, now nutting full, OK it's no prhoblem.

Ten guys come, yorh team, no you vun guy, yorh team come, coach, wife, husband, find chip place to stay, it's no prhoblem. Espensif place, it's no prhoblem. It's no prhoblem. Five minnits. OK?"

Not OK.

Awkward silence, worst nightmare of any tipped employee. His heart is racing. Those fucking subtitles.

Two chances at most.

"Didd you pay money? To hostell?"

"No." Relief in the client's voice. His shoulders. Both dodged the bullet. "I booked online. I mean, they emailed me a confirmation. They never ast for a down payment, nothin' like that."

Caught the "no" and the relief. Kept nodding for the rest. Greenhouses are harbingers of fellowship under Moon and stars. Disused quarries, road signs, everything looks spick and span. *Grey Pinot, my beautiful silence*. Or a Slavonian Tokay. A family winery for sure. Mall manager's reserve. Swaddled in wet kitchen towels, consigned to the freezer.

Doc Diamond dodges the bullet.

The real kind of guy,

He dodges the bullet.

Rudi the Taxiste,

That hero of the streets,

He wins another fight.

The fan stand leads. Flairs, pennants, lubricated throats: the full panoply. The entire stadium picks up, tens of thousands fist pumping. Old school spontaneous, not that cliché ‘North curve where you at, South curve where you at’ crap you get nowadays. A chant remembered when we are gone.

*Every day and night,
Rudi slaughters snitches,
Rudi pummels cops,
Them and their,
Them and their,
And their fucking dogs.*

“My frhend, I call somevun to say you betterh. Beforh det, please, vot pozishan you play?”

“Fullback. I’m a rightie. I can cover the left as well.”

The driver brushes off the changed tone. “You arh left beck.”

“Right back. I sometimes play left, it’s not, you know, my natural position.”

“You arh two side beck. Diss is verhy good two pozishans. Yorh speed?”

“Yeah, I’m—I’m all right. I’m pretty fast.”

“Ken you play *odderh* pozishan? Lest five minnits?”

“Not really. Like... nnnnot really. No.”

“Mmhm.” The driver burps out of nowhere, slaps his chest.

Fandom is infectious. The client can’t resist. “I’ve played holding midfield, you know, defensive midfield, but I’m, ah, I’m a lot better out wide, you know?”

That's it. There's the tip. "It's ah, you wouldna thunk it, you know think thought it, it, 'cause I played tight end but yeah."

"Good." Again no idea what he said. "Tehhnicaal?"

Technique? "Sure. Yeah. I'm good on the ball."

"End, to drhibble?"

"Ah, no. I'm not super good at dribbling. I mean, I can get past a guy, but I'm not specifically good at dribbling. Not, I'm not like that as a player, know what I mean?"

The answer is unsurprising. "Yes yes. Drhibbling you must hev. Someting you hev orh you no hev. Don't hev, doesn't hev, sorhy."

"Don't have. Yeah, I'm not, I'm fast, but not super quick."

"Good. End, tsenter-shoot?"

Silence.

"Tsenter-shoot." Hand gesture. "You rhun, tsenter-shoot, end head."

Silence. Incomprehension.

"Tsenter-shoot." Impatiently losing sight of the tip. "Mosst imporhtunt." Would have taken a drink if he had one. Self-impalingly. That's what that stoner said.

Quick walking motion using two fingers. "You hev ball, end you rhun. On de ving."

"Down the sideline. Yeah."

"You rhun, rhun, rhun, end you..." A finger traces an arc, right to left.

“Tsenter-shoot.” Nods. “Jump, head, end goll.”

“Cross. You mean cross. You center the ball, that’s right. OK. I got a, I got a pretty decent cross, sure, I’m not, I’m not bad. Wait, you’re sayin’ that goin’ up front, you’re sayin’ that’s the thing, that’s how you judge a soccer fullback? Oh, wow. Oh, man.”

“Yess yess. Mosst imporhtunt. My frhend, yes, vie you tink I’m jokking? Don’t hev det, you arh no beck. You just say you arh beck. You arh, my frhend, you arh stopperh who play on beck. You arh doing fifty perhcent off job. Up frhont, like you say. Vidaut you go up frhont, make mistake no verhy much my frhend baat vidaut go up frhont, up de ving, det is fifty perhcent. You arh Gallas. Det is Gallas. Inn yorh team, det is, vait.” Taps a finger on the steering wheel. “John, nonno, Eddie Johns. Eddie Johns. Plays on full beck—eh, yes—his *pozishan* is stopperh. You see diss everhy time ven he play. Sevens, eight times everhy game. Good chance, go up ving, do someting, eeeeh no, neverh go, he always stay beck.”

Contact again, this time with triumphant anticipation, vindicated when the client’s eyes go wide. A notch on the soccer trivia belt, one of the most prestigious belts.

“I can’t believe you thought of Eddie Jones just like that. Is that, I mean, dude, are you like some—?”

“My frhend. Velcome to Split. Hah hah haah. I tink you vill hev fun. Off courhse I know him. Dey pley, I votch. Beforh Johns you hev Spectorh, Popp,

same ting. OK. Good. Good. You arh beck, good speed, good tehhnicaal, end good vot?”

“Cross.”

“Crhoss. Good. Good. Tenk you forh tiching me diss. Now I call my frhend to say you forh hostell. Verh you stay. Smarht, big smarht, my frhend, no little smarht like me. I know so much, he says. I go to school, I finish de school. I rhid all de books, I know who say vot, who rhite book. Everhy five inn de school. Everhy five. He speaks English betterh den prhofessorh. He says inn de school, to English ticherh, it’s no, it’s yes, end she say yes, vot I say it’s no, vot he say it’s yes. Diss heppen trhee, forh times. Vun time vit historhy ticherh. Det’s vie he go to Aamerhica. Diss guy, my frhend. Diss guy is smarht end crhazy togederh. He tinks best playerh inn de historhy is beck. Inn de historhy. My frhend, wait, wait. Hah hah hah hah.”

Which of these shirts? I am asking myself on the other side of town. Just out of the shower, neck deep in prehistoric societies and Italian family history, bellowing altered lyrics to Waylon Jennings at the mirror.

“Audacious, amply headed mystagogue,

How ugly, evil and crazy you are,

How those long nailed toes

Are desirous of the clip.”

My crumpled clothes on the floor. The smell. The prohibition. Start the washer.

A friend will walk my dogs during my absence. Smell it. Didn't call her.

The washer.

"Doc Diamond," my Hungarian niece breaks in ten minutes ahead of schedule. "The crapmeister himself. Doc Diamond. The"

"Hey, I'm not ready. Give me fffsix minutes."

"Great, yeah, good, it's something else. I picked up an American guy, he's here to play ball, can you believe that? I need you to help me translate something. I'm putting you on speakerphone."

"Happy to help."

Background noise goes from whisper to shriek.

"There's only that one hostel which I said, that's the only hostel in town. And it's no good. The one he wants, that was an OK place to stay, but it's not there anymore. Say all this in English."

"Hello?"

"Yeah, hello?"

"Hi, my name's Johnny."

"I'm DeMarcus. Nice to meet you."

"Hi, Marcus. Welcome to Dalmatia. My friend Rudi there, the driver, he says you're looking for a hostel."

"Yeah, thanks. Sure. He, ah, he says it's closed, though."

"It is, I'm afraid. It's wintertime. They might reopen in May, or for spring break. The one hostel that *is* open year round, trust me buddy, you don't wanna

stay there.” Brainwave. “You can stay at my place if you want, for free. Rudi’s picking me up after he drops you off anyway. It’s gonna be empty for a few days. It’s a, it’s a three bedroom, two bathroom and, I live alone. So it’s not a problem when I get back. Couple dogs, though.”

“Yeah, no, that’s good, but I mean, I don’t even know you, and wait, you’re local, you’re Dalmatian?”

“Yup. Real life Split personality. Three years in the US. And you’re absolutely right, I could be a weirdo. He can, no, listen, the driver can hook you up—I’m sorry buddy, I gotta get my dogs outta the way real quick. Wasn’t expecting a call for another couple minutes.”

“Oh yeah, what kind of dogs you got?”

Obstruction one cleared. “I got two strays.”

“That’s mad as hell, man. That’s mad as hell.” Caller pays in Croatia. “Yeah I used to have a puppy when I was a kid. He’d crawl into my bed all the time, like nuzzle and, yeah. I hear ‘em yappin.’”

Two cleared.

“We never had room, I guess. I was gonna say, the driver can hook you up real easy, ah, vacation rentals are like the only economy here. If he said ‘apartments,’ that’s what he meant. It being the off season, you got the pick of the market. Twenty bucks a night, fifty’s high end, it’s regulated, you’re not gonna, there you go, you’re all set. The thing is, Rudi the driver, you can call him Doc Diamond by the way, Doc Diamond told me you came here to play

soccer.”

“Ah, yeah, that’s right. Figured you guys are real passionate, you know?”

“Yess yess, Dokk Diamond.”

“Moochie tammo.” Quiet over there. “Sorry. May I ask what’s your best position?”

Chuckle. “Right back. He, ah…”

“What do you think about Javier Zanetti?”

Laughter.

“What?”

“Oh, it’s just, I mean thanks for explainin’. Uh, the driver told me that you think the soccer Goat’s a full back.”

“Yeah yeah. I know what I think. What do you think?”

“I, umm, I get that you guys are like really into soccer, and all, like scary into soccer, and that’s actually good for me, you know, and I appreciate you callin’ it soccer…”

“You just got off a real long flight. Sorry, buddy. Marcus, is it?”

“DeMarcus, yeah.”

“DeMarcus. Got it. My bad. Alright. Talk to you later.”

“Later.”

“Word.”

Background noise dies.

“What was that? What you told him at the end.”

“Not telling.”

“Daay nesserhy.” Come on, cut the crap.

“Fuck you, not telling.”

“Not picking you up.”

“Not fucking your mom. She’s gonna be all antsy.”

“You nutjob. Villa Kitta, I’m hoping you know the owner.”

“Hi how are you, sure. Know her know her, no. She seems legit.”

“You don’t have her number.”

“Sorry.”

“Figured it was in that neighborhood. Alright fuck it. I’ll ask dispatch if I can’t think of anything. Give you a missed call when I head toward your place. In ten or under. Got an open jar kiseleeh krhastavaatsaa?” of pickles?

“My man’s got a craving for them?”

“Ha ha ha ha.”

“Cause mine are, like, Bosnian, I think. Nothing special.”

“Ha ha. No they’re for me.”

“Mommy’s been cooking for you, huh?”

“When I was little, she taught me douchebags should walk to their fucking ferries.”

“Last taxi before the onset of the flood?”

“Fuck you, bring krhastavtse.” the gherkins. “See you in ten. Undersize douche.” Hangs up and puts the phone away. “My frhend. You say. You say.

Javier Zanetti. Good crhoss—orh don't have good crhoss? Aha? End, how many times champion? Aha? Vit Arhgentina, vot? Aha, aha? Vit him, vidaut, it's same. Baat please, vun odderh to esk. Ven I see you, you arh finishing toilet?"

"Were you seriously on his case with your toilet and shit nonsense? You *imbecile*."

"No, come on. You gotta, you know, you gotta be professional. Friendly and professional both. That was the only thing I asked him. That and"

"Potezzanye vodde?" Flushing?

"And what he thought about ours, at the airport. There, that's it."

"I bet he told you he never paid attention to something, but he would now."

"Yeah."

"Doesn't remember, needs to check with people back home."

"Yeah. How do you"

"How do I know you're a great big stupid wildebeest? Po urhe okisselin krhastavtsima." For half an hour about pickles. "You cosmic disgrace. You should be pulled off the air. Did you mention farting?"

A second. Two. "No."

"Did you fart?"

"No."

"Did you burp?"

“Look. He asked about the war. He asked about the Yugoslavs.”

No eye contact between friends. In sauerkraut season one dreads asking what people had for lunch.

Magnolias in full bloom down Solinska Road.

“Well, what’d you tell him?”

“I explained. I told him, you know, I told him ‘jug’ is south and ‘slava’ is fame, southern fame. The famous people in the south.”

“That’s not what it means, paragon of cretinism. The name Slavs comes from the same root as slovo.” Word. “Slavs means ‘people who share a language.’”

“Shit. I thought it was—ah, who cares. What’s the English word for koyega, kogga?”

“Which one.”

“Aaah vitch, I fuck its mother. And what’s zeema?”

“Zeema is being an ignoramus. Winter.”

“Isn’t that pobyednik?”

“Winner.”

“Give me a break.”

“Zeema is winter, win-terr. Linger not overmuch on the T. Zeemski pobyednik, winter winner.”

“Now I didn’t hear it again. Fuck it. Glavno?”

“Main.”

“Ah shit. What else was it? Ozbilyno.”

“Serious.”

“Can’t believe it. I’ll do better in the summer. No more subtitles, I swear this time. Gledachu inoosta.” I’m gonna look at their mouths. “What’s *tie rhend*? What?”

“Sorry. It’s a position in American football. I wanna ask you something. Do you remember when we were kids, during the sirens, can you recall the exchange rate of marbles for church tickets?”

“*Bonya*. One *bonya*, one ticket.”

Porcelain marble, the lowest rank above plain. Worth two plains. Cheap.

“What can you do with one ticket?”

“That’s right.”

“Almost as bad as an empty envelope.”

“Ooh, I forgot those. Nice.” An empty envelope could be obtained for free at any post office. The hope that grownups wouldn’t check whether it contained a note was a bluff of last resort.

“Yeah, I’m still in touch with some straight kids like that,” Rudi goes on, meaning dealers in contraband. “Tonchi, Vlaaya, Pulichich, a couple people you don’t know.” Points to his mouth, his nose. “Remember how they were always trading comic books, or firecrackers?”

“Goes without saying you trashed Chelsea.”

“Just Gallas.”

“Mmhm.” My anger has been expended. After a long wait we turn left.

“Wait, why are we”

“Construction work around the Bishop’s Palace. Overseas pier, where is it this time, Italy I’m guessing, or, you’re going back to Greece?”

“Italy. Remember Maria Petrin?”

“Do I know her, come on.”

“Know her name now?”

“Married a Guido, did she?”

“Nope.”

“Then why she change her name?”

“Remember the business with her dad?”

“Wait. OK. He what, he went missing? His plane crashed, or what was it?”

“He was always gone a long time, then he’s back. Work sometimes, or he’d fight with, you know, the mom. Story ends with him not coming back, just like that. He’s a missing person. Plane, no. Or, I don’t know.”

“You’re saying she changed her name to his, the dad’s.”

“That’s right. Rich family in Italy.”

“Shit.”

“Do you know any other words?”

“Midget halfling gnome.”

“Bessa self roommates.”

“Squat boring goblin. Walks the rest of the way.” The sound of him

cracking?

“Mother roommate grown man Sigmund.”

“Fuck you.” But he guffaws.

A right followed by another left.

“That time you told me the three rules.”

Industrial docks straddle the subsidized shipyard. He expects a reminder.

“You can’t hurt anyone. You can’t take their stuff. You can’t back out on your given word.”

“Or, on your signed contracts,” remembers.

Office buildings are under construction on either side.

“Tell me about your relationship. Nobody knows what happened.”

“Why should they?”

“Be serious, it was what, grade school.”

“Seventh, eighth grade—and ninth.”

“You had straight As, didn’t you? In high school too, five point oh.”

I wish. “Not every year.”

“Remember grade school toilets, that powder they used to clean them stank worse than the”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Suchidar and Plakalusha, projects exactly like ours, six stories, little parks, public schools, minimarts. Apartment buildings are now condos with fresh coats of paint and new cars outside.

“Is loving an act of will?”

When this turns out not to be a rhetorical question, I answer “No.” In retrospect it sounds sterile and pretentious, perhaps the reason for his failure to elaborate.

Poyishan gas station, open 24/7, beloved of nighttime drinkers.

“We were gate friends. Lana, her you probably don’t know.”

“Lana Botich, not dentist—the other thing.”

“Orthodontist. Yeah that’s her. She and Tino were older, by the time they left for high school Maria and I were like fifth grade, or sixth. Then we both got jobs at the marina.”

“Which one?”

“Zenta.”

“Walking down, walking up, one thing led to another.”

“Yeah. Pretty much. Once she started high school downtown, clashing shifts plus you know, homework, gym class in the off shift, this and that, we only had the weekends. Cold weather, what’re you gonna do? First couple of months, you know.”

The restaurant district outside the downtown ferry port.

“Yeah I saw Lana the other day. Same cafe with different people, had a few words. I knew she was your street. I didn’t know she was your gate. Your street has those three big gates, the one above the playground and the other two. I never know which is whose. You know Tino overdosed, right?”

“Yeah. Been here four, five months. I told,” finger snap, “DeMarcus on the phone, I’m only staying in Italy a few days. I’m not like in touch with the old crew, that one I did hear from my parents.”

“Yeah, Beggi too, Zuya. Beggi, grandma lets him sleep there, gives him betting money... Zuya’s gone even, you know, Zuya’s even worse. He’s on the pill.”

“Anyone made it?”

Chuckles. “Sure. Ines made it, she’s engaged to a second officer, sick money. Could be making chief engineer in five years. Sandra, married, kids. Husband’s family own rentals up past Trogir. She’s always there, they got people staying now, for, ah...”

“Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s right. Natasha, Luka, Franko, they’re married. Luka turned out real churchy. Didn’t use to be like that. Danyra.” At my head turn clarifies, “Not to him, some computer guy, Dominic, Domagoy, met him one time. Or no, his last name’s Domazet. She grows herbs and gives them away. Plenty of people made it, I mean we’re, everybody’s still here. You and OK, Maria, a couple others, sure. Mostly, though, everybody’s still together.”

“Still together,” I scoff. “Still a bunch of kloshars. Still happily a half step above the lowest of the low. Sandra, cleaning up after people, that’s having made it? You, ten years down the line, a robot works around the clock for the price of a battery. Knows all the street numbers, never drives around, never has to ask. The

Albanian taxi departs for history.” Becomes a thing of the past. “Then what do you do? Some asshole politician bans being better than you. Gets your vote, of course.”

White hulls take up space in front. Rudi switches gears to park.

“Yeah well, I’m taller than you. A tall, looksome kloshar, by all accounts. Could be worse. The two of you are, catching up in Italy.” Looks at the bag in the back seat. Seems too big for a few days.

“I need to return something that’s hers. Do you know Sasha Gorovich?”

“Pffff! Haven’t thought of that dude in years. Does he, has he been living in Split?”

“He got a bread maker from his mom.”

“Fuck you and his mom,” but can’t help laughing. Opens the door, keys in hand. “She curly too?”

26 Spanish Heritage

“Hey.”

“Hey, love the hair.”

I add a last moment “hey” on the point of friends laughing in each other’s arms.

A third, politely indefinite “hey” as we separate, followed by more laughter.

“Yeah, I changed it back.” She means the hair. “Let’s go.”

A short escalator ride takes us outside the harbor building. Ahead lies the long wall, then geek heaven. Or so I was told.

“Journey? Better this time, I hope.”

“Thanks. It was a deal less unpleasant.”

Laughing as we walk. To our right is dirty seawater, not two feet below. To the left, a granite wall truncates sightlines. Ancona harbor.

A young family is drawing closer. The daughter, having made some inroads down one side of a candy bar, is smearing the remainder on her face. She rewards my look with a grotesque gap-toothed smile.

An antique cannon guards the harbor entrance. The barrel points northeast, at our hometown.

“No islands,” I observe.

“Not on this side. Now and then you can see Vis.”

“That far.”

“Not often.”

The harbor bustle has been left behind. While traffic is light, cars, vans and scooters take up every last parking space.

“I don’t know, do you, I mean, do you wanna, do you have, like, questions? Maybe, or...”

“Why Gramps left me the box is the big one. As part of the dowry. I’m hoping we know that now.”

The sidewalk is stone as well, smooth cream blocks. “Our best guess is, to hide it.”

“To hide it.” A look of dawning understanding.

“The needle in the haystack. A hope chest provides a logical haystack. You’re young, you’re unattached, it can’t possibly raise any red flags.”

“Why—why the box to me, though? Why not, I don’t know, donate it to some museum, or a university? Or something.”

“I can’t answer that. There isn’t, I don’t know if he left you, a letter maybe.”

“No, I’m pretty sure there wasn’t any letter, message, for anybody. I mean, I’ve got my copy of the will. I haven’t thrown it away.” More thoughtful than conversational. The previous visit taught me the importance of staying alert to these little signs.

“The most recent thing in the box is late eighteen hundreds. Before Gramps was born, I think. It’s a letter from a man named Corrado Varrini.” The name

makes her turn. “We think he was writing to a female family member. Opens with ‘mia carissima,’ but there’s no name. No, no, romantic endearments, so niece or cousin maybe, or an in-law. Signed his last name. The dowry could’ve been meant for her. Or the letter’s a coincidence. It also, the dowry could be a keepsake, not meant to be used.”

A door in the wall with a small space in front roped off.

“Either way, the box being in the chest may not have been Gramps’ idea. Somebody could’ve put it there before he inherited.”

Maria looks up and down the street. “I see what you’re saying. Varrini was Aunt Bella’s maiden name. Gramps’ first wife. Cousin Suzy is sure to know who Corrado was. I’m taking you to meet her. The townhouse, remember? Not the main big house.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“We can cross here.” We do. “Suzy understands English. I’m not sure how well she speaks it. There’s a chance your Italian’s better. We’ll see how it goes.”

Holds the door for me.

A security guard in a miniature office. Maria nods at her concise report. I raise my eyes and she motions me through with a smile.

After another door people crowd us with food, drink, notepads. Maria waves them away. The drinks people catch my look.

“Dottore Pèpper, per favore.”

“Prego.”

“Grazie.” (Dr Pepper, please. Here you go. Thank you.)

Pop, fizz, herby sugary goodness. If only they’d export to Croatia.

“Oshta poist, poppitt?” Maria insists: wanna eat, drink?

“Maybe later.”

“Will you please let somebody take that bag?” A sweeping gesture indicates the legion candidates.

“I’m good. It’s not heavy. Nothing but clothes and the—box. Holy *crap*.”

The villa’s slender dignified arches plummet into glorious manicured flowerbeds. No color is missing. And the details, the arbors, the gables. Hard not to stare.

“If the big house is eight out of ten, this one may be three.”

I can only laugh. “Comforting to see our millennial serfdom put to good use.”

A shared giggle amid contemptible mousy Italians who can get nothing past us.

“There she is.”

An overweight middle-aged woman in a flurry of beads and pastel prints.

“Ciao Suzy.”

“Ciao Maria.”

Rapid talk during which I look around at marble statuary.

“Ciao, I’m Susanna. Suzy.”

“Ciao, I’m Johnny. Gióvanni. Giovánni.”

Grins as we are shaking hands.

“Welcome. Later di rain, we go insida, butta now we go inna di jarden?”

“Si, garden, giardino. Andiamo.” Let’s go.

Laughing with gusto, Suzy turns around. We follow her to the more formal back garden with trimmed hedges and gravel paths. A second sky has been chiseled into four perfect ponds.

“How many people work here?”

“Seven, eight,” Maria answers, Split idiom translated verbatim. “You’ve seen them most.”

Three wicker armchairs and a small table have obviously been readied for us. Trees are creaking, however, and windows being shuttered as the downtown is bracing for the storm. I look up at the congealing clouds. Sparrows and thrushes are flying low. By the time I sit down, Maria has lit a cigaret.

“Yestee yosh zadrougo?” Are you still in favor of the other thing?

“Sure,” she says. “When I’m with the right people.” Eye contact.

“Do you have any?”

“No. Did you bring any?”

“Sorry. Blueshirts are opprobrious with regard to incoming traffic. Canine sidekicks, likewise unremittingly ill-disposed.”

She indicates that my remark made sense before switching back to English.

“Suzy, do you know the name Corrado Varrini?”

“Si. Of course.” A smile for our blank looks. “Di faader of Aunt Bella.”

“He wrote a letter to someone he calls ‘carissima.’ It mentions ‘Vito’s Spanish heritage.’”

My statement makes Suzy sit up and stare into empty space.

“Spennish eritage. Vitoss! *Vitoss!*”

We give her a minute. Maria whispers “Nerhaspolozheno souprhottstavlyanye tissuchlyetnom kmettstvou yeootyeshno nepopoustlyivo,” the ill-disposed opprobrium toward millennial serfdom is comfortingly unremitting, and we laugh. A starling poops down from a branch. I recall Rudi the Taxiste regaling me with Nauruan history.

“Gramps’ name was Vittorio. Do you think the box he left Maria could be this Spanish heritage?”

“Iffa Captain Rocco win it in Spaina... itta must be. Must be. Butta, it couldda be di faader. Di faader of Vito, ee was also Vito.” She licks her lips.

“You ev di box in youra...”

“Si.” I unzip the bag and pull it out. Maria moves her ashtray to make room.

“Spennish eritage,” Suzy repeats with the deepest admiration. “It’sa, it’sa wreetten. It’sa, manshoned? Manshioned?” Maria and I nod. “It’sa manshioned in somma places, butta, I couldda notta understanda. Untila now, I’m teenking it’s an ouse in Spaina. Orra landa. Butta no, no pro-propri-aa...”

“Title deeds. Si. No documents that say the place is yours.”

“Si! Yes. No docoumentsa. No mappa. Butta di box, it azza very old tingsa? Maria saysa, eh, your emaila, your frienda tinka di connection witta Voynich

booka?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t think that anymore. He’s a, hah hah, he’s a little disappointed. Hah. Look, I told you I’ve got it all laminated and stuff, protected. Still. I don’t know if we should be opening it out here, it’s kinda windy.”

“Si, it’sa calming, we shoulda go insida.” Looks at Maria, who puts out her cigaret in assent.

As we walk back to the house, servants invisible to the cousins position themselves to remove the furniture. The cupbearer holds up another can for me. I shake my head with a contrived smile, hand raised in salute.

“Is itta nice now in Spalato? Di wedder?”

“Si. In Dalmatia, the outdoors doesn’t often shut down for maintenance.” And we get our own drinks. Suzy looks my way. I make a slicing motion across my upper arm. “Short sleeves during the day, in Split.” Their name, why the hell not? “In Spalato. When the Sun goes down you wanna tutta.” A sweatshirt.

Opens the back door for us. “Beautiful city, Spalato. Spleeta. Izza notta far from Ancona, butta—eh, notta much connection.”

Invade us a few more times, why don’t you? “Si. Close and far away.”

Maria is texting during this banter. We step into a dark room. When Suzy turns a dial I am once again reduced to staring.

“Di family archiva. It izza my worka.”

Sepia photos line the walls. Shelves are packed with books old and new. The hi-tech gear is what really draws the eye, computers with huge flat panel

displays surrounded by a glut of high end gadgets.

Maria's phone rings. She goes out into a hallway.

Suzy moves toward an elderly couple in one of the oldest looking photos. Gives the frame a loving pat. For the first time we hear a snarl of thunder. "Corrado and Laura Varrini." Points to the wall on her right, at an enlarged photo of a man I recognize. "Vito Lucceno, when ee change is namea, Vito Birinaldi, and is wifea Isabella. Ere, Bella Varrini when she wazza leetle girl."

I look around while Suzy turns more dials. Light changes as the blinds go up.

"This here. Andrea Birinaldi. Am I right?"

"Si. Maria's faader."

"I thought that was him. I remember him from when I was a boy." Who knows how long she'll be on the phone? "Is it really illegal to name a daughter Andrea?"

Grins. "Si. Maybe no. Dependsa which place in Eataly." Clears her throat. "You, you nyoo Tino? Di fra, di brudder of Maria?"

"Si. As kids. Bambini. Not as, as men. Please." I point. "Andrea. And Vito. Is there anything you can tell me about their relationship?"

Looks out the window. Down at the lush bunches of basil on the sill. The spotless lab is awash with its aroma.

"Vito, ee wanted Andrea to go to schoola. Eh. Andrea, ee wanted to travel, to ev adventoores."

I am nodding as she is saying this. “Other times, other places. New horizons.”

“Si, si, si, for Andrea diss izza fussinaayting. To go to Rome, eh, to sit in classroom...”

“Like being in prison.”

“Si, si, si, si. And dey fighta, and Andrea go away. Venti anni.”

“Twenty years old. Wanderlust. Voglia di viaggiare.”

“Viaggiare. Si. You speaka much better Italian den my Eenglish.”

Maria’s voice through the door. Doesn’t sound like goodbye. Will she have that ciggy afterward?

“Thank you, but I don’t think so. Please. When they had the argument, what was happening with the other children?”

Turns and points at more photos. “Angelo, deadda, inna di war, many yearzza. Lorenzo, deadda. Suicidio.”

“Suicide.”

“Si. Stefano, ee didn’t marry, butta...”

“He adopted a, girl, was it?”

“Si. Diana. Butta, she getta sicka, and die. Den Stefano izza very sedda. Depresso. Ee don’t talka to nobaady.”

My turn to look out the window. A nimbus front is drawing closer, the wind picking up.

“None of them went to school? Angelo, Lorenzo, Stefano, the daughter?”

“Francesca. Si. My mamma. She wazza younger. None of dem went to schoola, no. Andrea wazza, ee wazza, curioso?”

His portrait. The eyes, something about the posture. New horizons. Curiosity.

Ending relationships, traveling overseas.

I lower my voice. “Do you think it’s possible Maria got the box from Vito because she reminded him of Andrea? Because he saw the son in the granddaughter?”

The door opens and she walks in.

“Si. I teenka det’s itta.”

We look at Maria.

“I thought of more questions.”

“Shoot.”

Closes the door. We congregate in the center of the room.

“What’s ambe-makka?”

“Some explosive.”

“Defaulting is then what, blowing stuff up?”

“Defaulting means using what someone doesn’t know against them. Acting in bad faith. That’s unfair if you’re, I guess, if you’re being strict with yourself.”

“Yeah, I don’t get it.”

“Wartime defaulting, we would call that war crimes. Using explosives when the other side only has bows and arrows. Not giving them a chance. It invalidates

winning.”

“I see. The General’s Sons because of this aren’t heroes in their opinion.”

“That’s right.”

“What about those tablets, Zib wrote the poems you’re saying?”

Suzy’s head keeps turning like she is watching tennis.

“I think both are too old. They probably had some special meaning for her.

We can’t think of anyone else that might have kept them.”

“And when you said corruption?”

“If you, if you copy something by hand, over and over again, there’s gonna be mistakes. When those mistakes go downriver, the text is corrupt. Nobody has the original anymore. If they do, they no longer understand it, because the language has changed, and the writing. I told you most owners of the box were only interested in leaving their stuff. We’re not sure anyone tried to understand what came before. Abdul may have hoped to decipher some of it.”

“Yeah, now that you mentioned him. That sort of middle ground, what, that they tried to find?”

“The convergence.”

“Yeah, I didn’t get that.”

“Huh. It was an inclusive, shall we say, compromise. Between religions, philosophies, conflicting sets of values. The ultimate goal was a recursion which would reconcile all opposites. A supreme holism. A humanistic, let’s say, ontology and epistemology. A definition of reality and knowledge. Not what to

do so much as why. Why be a good person. Why be generous and full of empathy. That's what they tried to do. They tried to present this in a way everyone could understand. Could" grok "assimilate, internalize."

"Then the Christians came."

"That's right. Jesus allegedly told them to burn the books. Not to mention the writers. Some people are saying that a secret tradition emerged and influenced others like Spinoza. I mean, yeah, they failed. Sure. It's just, the fact that they tried to team up in the first place is, is unique I think. Exciting. Inspiring."

Maria flips her phone open. The three of us have remained standing. I set the box down on a desk when we came in, next to some glossy art books.

"I teenka der izza no doubta," Suzy says softly. Maria takes no notice. I push my duffel bag with the turn of a foot.

"OK, one more."

"No, please go ahead."

The lour's palette is succumbing to midnight blue.

"In the email you, you said something about the evolution of, ah..."

"Ways to rationalize privilege."

"Yeah, that."

Lightning flares on the lens of an ancient camera on a spindly tripod, with the black cloth in the back.

"The rich people in power ride up to the village saying, 'To arms, the enemy

approacheth!’ Some smartass villager wants to know, ‘Why should we fight and die so that your children can lord it over our children?’ The rich are in need of a new story to tell. Supernatural forces command it, then the enemies speak another language, then it’s in your best interest, then science says you should do it. That’s why you should let us decide.”

Peeks at her phone again.

“Did you, by any chance, look that guy up?”

“Ah...”

“Dirk Willems.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

A piece of paper flies off the top of a stack. We hear the rain. Suzy closes the windows.

“Why is it like that, though? Why is it always us and them, you know, bosses and servants.”

“*Seven, eight*, you said.”

“Huh?”

“Work here.”

“Oh. Hah. I see your point.”

“Once you’re aware of how much more you have, it’s easy to think you’re special. You deserve to have stuff, others don’t. Does that make sharing a lot less fun? Probably. Then, I guess, oversaturation, prhezasichenost leads to decadence.” Suzy’s eyebrows go up. Maria translates.

“Maybe that’s how societies age. Happens in this country all the time. The Romans. Venice. The Renaissance, think about it, where was north Italy, where was the rest of the world. Ancient Greeks, Egyptians, same story. Byzantium, China, same story. The Dalai Lama says New Yorkers wanna go to Tibet and Tibetans wanna go to New York. A French writer says that whatever we lack appears divine.” She is nodding, but looking around. “Many paths lead to the summit of Mount Fuji. Plural identity is where respectful practice begins. The precondition for it, maybe. That’s the best I can do.”

“Ever heard of Valeria Colonnese?”

Suzy chortles. I shrug. “Can’t say I know the name.”

“Rich lady who left everything to her lover. Kids from three marriages, nothing. When they opened the place the thing where she kept the money and bonds and what have you, they found that mice ate most of it.”

Seeing my look Suzy adds, “True story.”

The women laugh with me. “Well done, mice.”

As thunderclaps suspend the conversation I think of Pripyat, of a fallen telephone pole in a forest firebreak, of a seabed wreck. An octopus feeling its way out the tiniest porthole.

“Is it all real?” Maria drops out of the blue.

I’ve been ready for this question half my life. “Is anything real?”

Blushing smile. “Which brings us back to Wittgi.”

I feel I should be filling Suzy in on this one. “Ludwig Wittgenstein. My

spiritual father.”

“Ah yes,” Suzy picks up unexpectedly. Most people have never heard of Wittgi. “Whatta we cannotta say, we mustta liv outta.”

Her charming attempt makes me smile. “Bravo!”

“Why not—” We turn to Maria again. Looking at me. “Why not write a book about this? A novel, you know, pretend it’s made up. You can change things around, so it’s really made up.”

“Really made up. Thank you. Very flattering. Can I do justice to the box?” The three of us look at it. “I hope I can.”

Maria turns to the window. “In the end, what can you do but hope?”