

The background of the cover is a vibrant cosmic scene. At the top, a bright, glowing blue nebula or star-forming region is visible, with wisps of gas and dust. Numerous bright blue lightning bolts or energy discharges streak across the dark space. In the lower portion of the image, the curved horizon of the Earth is shown, with green continents and blue oceans. A small satellite or space station is seen orbiting the planet. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, bright whites, and vibrant greens.

MILK

Barry
Tomkins

::Large Mass Ahead...That's A Planet.::

The readings came in before the imagery.

::Some other masses, very small,:: Sill signed. ::Closer.::

The screen changed, and a shape appeared—three parallel tubes joined by spars, a solar sail extending from the middle one partly unfurled, curling outwards in a rumped spiral.

That ship passed, and another came into range, this one a conglomeration of spherical bubbles. Behind it, one shaped like an arrow, another like a nest of needles.

::A graveyard of lost ships,:: said Jennifer, not knowing the sign for *graveyard* in a language spoken by people whose dead rotted very, very slowly and were kept on platforms in trees. She made up the word using the sign for *burial*, most often used on Sill's and Glider's planet when a certain fermenting vegetable was left to its own devices in a jar, and the signs for *death* and *field*.

::We are not lost,:: said Sill. ::We have the Waterman ship. And there is no such thing as a death-burial-field. We hope.::

Also By Barry Tomkins

Deem

Watermen



MILK

BY

BARRY TOMKINS



ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

AUSTIN TX

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MILK

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For Kether

PROLOGUE

WATERMEN COME, AND WATERMEN GO. THEY MAY HAVE DONE SO for centuries, perhaps eons, visiting from their own place, or time, or both. Their arrival is always heralded by sightings of the Milk, as it is known on Earth.

On other planets, in other galaxies, universes and/or temporal pockets (theoretical places that are the imaginary constructs of physicists, yet to be proved by experiment or visit), the Milk is known variously as the Squid, the Nest, the Flumes, the Hydra, the Gorgon (or a similar mythological figure in which the hair is supplanted by wriggling worms or snakes). Its many-tendriled, opaque, creamy or off-white ghostly presence in the night sky might suggest both a monstrous living being and a gateway.

Perhaps it was once both—a gateway and a giant space-breathing organism now dead or dying. This might explain its languid movements, its slow gyrations at which all come out to stare and wonder and, in the case of those on planets previously tormented by Watermen, quake in fear, scared the apparition portends another visit.

For those who have never been visited, and know nothing of the Watermen, the Milk is a celestial phenomenon of mystery and beauty. Others unvisited by Watermen see the Milk as the home of their Creator, a benign omniscience housed in a symbolic representation of mother's milk, the primal sustenance of human life, source of all things true, good and beautiful.

For more reason-oriented folks, on these planets and others, it's a "spatial anomaly" to be studied and understood, possibly an eruption of sub-space into the normal space-time continuum posited by astrophysics and similar narratives, both experimental and fictional.

On some planets, the Milk itself is thought of as a deity by believers in the supernatural, a god who sends demons to punish them for their many and various sins (which they nevertheless persist in committing).

People who know shudder when they see a Waterman ship floating overhead and cannot help hoping its crew will land somewhere else, torment someone else. For when they come they bring havoc and death: and they will search out children. They will sequester them, take small samples of their flesh, terrorize them, record their distress for future enjoyment. Usually, the samples are the only things taken away, but Watermen have been known to abduct humans.

And then they will go, leaving behind Gifts, perhaps intentionally, perhaps not—energy devices powerful enough to light and heat whole cities and cover them with protective domes.

This is the story of some of the abducted.

Watermen love moisture, cannot live without it, leading some to think their evolution has grown along a different fork in the branch to that of humans. Brute force is their weapon, and their undoing. They are not clear thinkers, the Watermen, and are probably slaves of a higher intelligence. Clever humans can defeat them if given the chance. Once, some did. They killed a raiding party and stole a Waterman ship.

This is their story, too.

1.

SEVERAL OF THE OTTERS DROPPED THE FISH THEY WERE EATING. Others stopped their play. In unison, they turned their heads towards the shore. The whole tribe became serious, attentive, thoughtful. A dozen pairs of black eyes stared at the horizon.

The booming bounced across the glassy surface in a regular rhythm. When nothing else happened, the otters lost interest. They resumed their eating and playing, some diving in search of fresh fish, others teasing siblings and cousins into helter-skelter watery chases.

Far beyond the otters, a village of tall thin dark people, the Potters, stopped caulking boats, making supper, tying nets, shaping clay, and turned together towards the sound.

The Zymat heard the music and paid no attention, even though they were the closest of all, just across the inlet. They pulled hoods close around their faces and kept their heads down, as usual.

Hari Owen beat his biggest drum, pausing several seconds between each thump of the heavy stick. On his right stood Ivor Tread, and on his left, Tom Davies and Hayman. On the other side of Ivor Tread, Sorrel watched from her wheelchair.

The coracle carrying David X was well off-shore, towed there earlier by Hayman and Tom Davies in their boat halfway to where the otters watched. The otters' heads were just visible as round bobbing dark spots, like floating balls. A faint wisp of smoke rose straight up from the boat. Hari kept drumming, banging the hide in a steady rhythm, raising the stick high between each

stroke, holding it there, arm crooked at the elbow, bringing it down again at just the same interval each time.

The smoke thickened. Hari did not change his pace. Flames appeared, at first hard to see against the gray sky then more easily visible against the dark smoke that poured upwards as the resinous branches mounded under and over the body caught fire.

The otters sniffed, dived and swam away in search of cleaner air.

The fire soon raged. Hari beat the drum until the the flames died down and the embers were quenched by the tepid waters of the sea.

2.

THE FLOCK SWOOPED OVERHEAD IN PERFECT FORMATION, ALL screeching, and flapped down to the copse, where they circled the cedars and rose again, beginning a mad circuit up to the village and back down to the trees. Cormorants—or what Ivor Tread had long ago given the name of cormorants, the closest thing he'd known in a place of similitudes and near-misses and close things and almoses.

Sometimes they festooned dead trees, all sitting at the same angle and holding their wings out, which was why he'd given them the name. They were black in the distance, slim, like sinuous bottles with heads. But when you got close they shone a dark lustrous green.

Not your grandmother's cormorants, or your mother's, he'd often thought, watching them gyre and flow in a fat ribbon. But about as tasty. He'd tried both, the real ones and these. Like trying to eat wads of greased string.

The cormorants came back up and circled overhead, having decided to fly rings around Ivor's house. They went around three times, making a horrible noise. Their screeching was neither synchronized nor harmonized, unlike their flying, which Ivor would have admired if they had not been so loud and messy, loving to land on roofs, chatter raucously, and leave chalky streaks behind.

Ivor sat on his porch and watched the flock. He wondered if his knees would unbend if he tried to get up and throw stones from the pile he kept near his chair. Lovely round gray stones that reminded him of a beach long ago and far away, where balls of blue-gray granite bubbled in kiltered slabs of gray mudstone, the ocean's slow erosion bringing them to light.

The cormorants spared him this time. They zoomed off to harass someone else—perhaps the Zymats, whose houses were just visible across the inlet, white hemispheres in regular rows. He hoped. The Zymats weren't good neighbors, never had been, and sang about as well as the cormorants.

"Something's spooked them, isn't it," said Hari Owen, brown face framed by long white hair and beard, peering over the porch railing.

"Good, they deserve spooking."

"Fancy a stroll down to the nets?"

"I'll try," said Ivor, standing and willing his knees to flex. "Got to get these joints moving anyway, or I'll stick in place for ever."

He staggered, held heavily onto the railing, and managed the three steps down to the path where Hari stood waiting. Hari knew better than to offer a hand.

Ivor's knees freed up. He patted a large round mass at the foot of the steps as he went by, one of his New World series. A collection of them dotted the garden, some in small families, some alone, cut from fat trunk sections of a tribe of dead swamp cedars—not really cedars but close enough, like the cormorants—shaped into rough oblongs and spheres then hollowed out. Smooth as glass on top from fifty and more years of patting, this one had been the first.

He stopped and bent and peered inside.

"Still there, are you?" he asked.

"Talking to figmentary people again, isn't it," said Hari.

"Some of my best friends have been figmentary."

Inside a tribe of tiny humans walked the walls, holding hands.



Every time he touched that little world, every day of his life in this new and unchosen world, Ivor remembered the day when he had finished another first one. That had been back home in Cambria, unveiled for Morgan Parvati when they were young and in love, Morgan standing on the sawdust-thick floor in his carriage house workshop, Ivor next to the shapeless hump under the tarpaulin a few feet off.

With an imitated drum-roll and a *ta-da*, he'd very dramatically pulled off the cover, revealing the oval hollowed-out world filled with people all tangled up in each other. People holding hands, arms around each other, doing hand-stands, making love (*Oh, they do it like us!* she'd said), dancing. Parrots (*Don't ask me why!* he'd said) on shoulders and flying through space on faint wires and perched on little rods that stuck out from the inner curved surface.

He'd watched Morgan, soft and dark and smart, studious Morgan, draw in her breath and let it out slow and soft and take a step forward to see inside

more clearly, watched the lovely lines of her body as she looked into the little world. She'd reached out to stroke his arm, oohed and aahed quietly.

She'd stared about the carriage house, sniffing at the slightly bitter odor of the curled shavings that littered the floor and the benches (she always mentioned that smell), glancing at the tools hanging on the walls, from the rafters. Saws and chisels and clamps and drills. All hand tools, of course, in those days.

And still hand tools, wasn't it, in this godd-forsaken corner of the universe. Not that they'd had a choice.

He'd been suited to that age of hand and mind, and still was, but not to this place.

Later, on that Cambrian day on Earth, while he was bathing off the day's wood-dust, soaking in the tub, she'd spent ages down there in the carriage house looking at it, giving the people and parrots names. And came back happy, telling him which was Morgan and Ivor and Sanjay and Bronwen X and Mifanwy, and Mrs. Sedge.

And they'd ended up, of course, like one of Ivor's little-people couples. She'd known exactly which couple she wanted after naming the characters of his world.

Not long after that the dreadful began to happen, when everything changed.



Down by the water, Ivor and Hari stood for a minute on the beach, a shoal of gray and brown round gravel running to mud upstream. The water lapped very gently onto the stones. A V-formation of staves marking the nets stuck up clearly. Light glanced off the water in sheets. They stood between two totem poles in the arc of poles that defined the shore's sweep.

"It still reminds me of—" said Hari.

"The Deem estuary," finished Ivor. "If the water wasn't so bloody warm. And there were proper tides. And a decent river. And the water got deeper sooner out there. And the fish were right. And the bloody cormorants were, well, bloody cormorants."

"There you go," said Hari. "Nothing what it seems."

"Story of our lives," said Ivor. "Isn't it. And how many more mornings are we coming down here to moan about things not being what they should? Predictable old codgers."

"Speak for yourself," said Hari. "Come on, old codger, let's check the nets. Maybe there'll be something different for supper."

"Fat chance. What's that?" Ivor shaded his eyes.

"What?"

“That.” He pointed out over the water.

Where the inlet widened into the sea, a line was just visible, as if someone had drawn with a thick gray crayon across the surface. The line extended from side to side, disappearing into mist where each coastline would be if it could be seen.

“Can’t be a wave. Can it?” asked Hari, shading eyes, too.

“Not here. Never.” Not in all his years since being brought here. No tide, no real wind, no mad storms out to sea, no earthquakes, no undersea volcanoes—nothing to make waves. Just the occasional brief rains dappling the surface, a gentle motion of the waters, the chop from mild breezes, a soft lapping on the gravelly shores, a whispering lasting all his decades here.

“It bloody hell *is* a bleeding big wave,” said Hari. “It’s an honest-to-godd tsunami, that bugger is.”

“*Bloody hell* is right,” said Ivor. “It’s big, *dai*, if we can see it that far out. Bloody enormous, isn’t it.”

“I’d say warning the others might be just the thing,” said Hari.

“Let’s go.” Ivor turned, and his knees almost gave out, and Hari caught him, and then he and Hari were slogging up the beach to the houses.

“Can you manage Sorrel?” asked Hari as they got close to Ivor’s cottage.

“You tell the others,” Ivor shouted.

He went inside, and Hari went hallooing and yelling at the sleepy-headed Tom Davies and Hayman, each in his own cottage, to get out and run for high ground.

Sorrel was sleeping. Ivor knew from long experience how hard it could be to wake her, so he didn’t bother, just leaned down and scooped her up and hefted the light body over his shoulder and walked straight out the back door. She woke as he came down the steps and headed to the path leading up to the other houses.

“What...?” she said then looked over his shoulder at the approaching wave. “What’s that, love? Get a move on, then. Unless you want to swim with me on your back, *dai*.”

Sorrel lifted her head, straining her neck. The wave was tall now, taller than the man carrying her. Her lower legs bounced as he held her thighs tight against his chest. Ivor felt her flesh against his cheek, warm through the nightdress.

Hari shouted as he ran ahead. Ivor made it fifty feet, and then Hari was back.

“I’ll take her,” he said.

“In a bit,” said Ivor. “Shadow me. Watch the wave.”

He walked steadily up the easy slope. Two old men appeared from their cottages. They looked down towards the water and then at Ivor carrying Sorrel, and at Hari, who yelled at them not to worry but to go on farther.

Halfway up, Hari took her, and Ivor did not turn around until they'd reached the top of the slope, no more than the wave's height above the water's level. The wave hit the shore below Ivor's cottage and all the way across the inlet to the Zymat settlement. He wondered if the Zymats had paid attention, had got out and up behind their huts before it hit. It was hard to care.

Then he saw them, hooded as ever, lined up on the low ridge opposite.

The wave rode easily over the gravel and smashed into two totem poles memorializing life on Earth—plants on one, animals on the other, framing the view from the cottage porch. The poles had been set deep into the gravel and underlying mud. They bent and shivered as the weight of the water struck, and leaned but did not break loose from the ground. As the wave passed, their tops angled out of the water.

The spheres and oblongs, and the little people of Ivor's carved Worlds, fared not so well. As the wave rushed madly up the beach, they were lifted and carried forward spinning, tumbling, scrubbing the gravel, bouncing on the mash of water and debris inside the wave. Dead fish and nets and staves and sculptures, all mixed together.

They huddled on the rise. The wave hit Ivor's house, smashing into the porch. They heard posts cracking and joints snapping apart.

"Oh," said Ivor, thinking of building that porch—the thick heavy timbers, the fat tenons and capacious mortises and sturdy whittled pegs, the carefully sliced shingles on the roof. Timber from a tree he'd had to learn afresh, tough as nails to work with, a wood for this damp climate, like the cedars of home but iron-hard.

He'd added the porch almost as long ago as he'd carved his first sculpture, so he could sit with Sorrel of an evening and watch his sculpture garden grow and think of the people he'd left behind when they'd been brought to this godd-forsaken place.

"Oh," he said, wondering if he could rebuild. His arms still remembered the heft of those timbers, the hard work at the saw pit with young Hari cutting logs lengthwise, splitting the shingles out. He'd had iron-hard limbs himself then, from a young life of handling heavy wood, malleting chisels, driving screws and bits. He flexed his arms and tried to imagine doing all that again.

They watched the water drive into the inlet, the wave curling up onto the banks like the wings of a giant skate, then flapping down. As the wave drove

up onto the banks, it lost some of its force and began boring along the narrow inlet separating the Cambrians' island from the Zymats', tumbling fish, scouring the water into a boiling froth of black mud.

They watched as the bore rose higher and higher and reached farther and farther. A minute later, the mad rush slowed, and slowed some more, and more, and the surface became calm, glassy, filled with the cool even light of the Milk's sky.

The waters turned and ran back the other way, down to the sea from whence they'd come, carrying dead fish and debris. The local tribe of otters was already on its way, round heads bobbing between waves, sensing easy pickings. Beached flotsam covered the shore. The flood was over.



Ivor's and Sorrel's main house was intact. The porch had been wrenched sideways and separated on one end where it hung skewed.

"Not as bad as I thought, from the sounds," he said.

A spherical sculpture had smashed through the doorway and lay on the parlor floor. The waterfront shutters had been open—they'd never made glass here, nor needed it. Water had poured in and run out, leaving the parlor drenched. Their room and the kitchen had been spared because the door in the back wall of the parlor had been closed.

"Good door, that," said Ivor as he opened it to look behind. It was made of narrow planks two inches thick. The wall itself was framed of thick timbers from hard-to-find large trees sheathed on both sides with laths—like the rest of the cottage much stronger than it needed to be, until this day.

"Strong enough," said Ivor. "Strong enough. I could have left you there, love, and you'd have been safe as houses, isn't it."

Hari had carried Sorrel down, and now she was put into her rocker, brought out and placed on the wet ground. The chair squelched on muddy grass but kept her feet out of it. She flexed her legs, which moved although not well.

The other men stood around. There were only four Cambrians now, from an original sixty-five men and one woman who'd left Earth in the Waterman ship, abducted suddenly, probably by mistake, in panic. Some had died when the ship was damaged on landing, another stupid Waterman mistake. The older survivors of that mess were either dead, after fifty or so years in Earth time, hard to measure here, or presumed dead, having traveled away in search of companionship or adventure in years past, to set up life elsewhere on the planet, with no firm news of them recently.

Hari was the only one who'd left and come back with a lover—Seel.

Sorrel and Ivor were the oldest—Ivor at probably about eighty, Sorrel a few years more. Hari had been twelve when taken, the youngest along with Eddie Griffith, one of those who'd left. Faint rumor had it that Eddie might be still alive, living in the Domes.

Now it looked as if Hari would live out his life lonely, on this side of the estuary, grilling fish for himself while the Zymats across the water sang their annoying songs.

"You could go to the Domes, make the trek, blend in there," Sorrel had said over one dinner as they sat on the porch. It was a topic they'd hashed over many times over the years, in one form or another. "At least you'd have company."

"No, thanks," said Hari. "I'd rather just be by myself in the end, if it comes to that. Or maybe it won't, anyway. There's no telling who'll be last. Hayman or Tom Davies might outlive me yet. You never know. If we learned one thing, it's not to predict what happens next."

"Because of the Domes, or the company?" asked Sorrel. "I mean, staying here."

"I could get on with the company—there's plenty would take me in. But not in the Domes. Too much like a city."

"And not in a village, either, I suppose?"

"Even harder, isn't it. There's the Potters, they'd have me. I could visit."

He thought of settling in the Potter village, a stranger in a village of sameness.

"There's always the Zymats," chimed in Ivor, waving his cup towards them.

"Har har de har har," said Hari. "My point exactly."

As if on cue, the Zymats began singing, odd harmonies bouncing across still waters in fragments. It was how they sang their songs—unmelodiously, in chunks of chords, without narrative.

"Still grating after all these years," said Sorrel.

"We could have moved," said Ivor. "I suppose."

But the Zymats, sixty-six of them, the only tribe to settle near them on the Milk, had moved in after the group from Earth was well-established, houses built, fishing traps set, meager crops planted and understood. All the Cambrians had to put up with was the music.

The Zymats were neither friend nor foe. They were simply, in Sorrel's phrase, pig-ignorant, shunning all friendly overtures from the humans, dismissing their efforts with turned backs. After a few tries, the humans had given up, and the two communities had gone their own ways, the rounded white huts on one side, the squared timber-framed cottages on the other.

The humans were dying out. Fewer and fewer cottages remained as they pulled down the empty ones and stacked the wood, not wanting ruins or waste. The Zymat village stayed the same, white domes in rows.

“How long do they live, then, do you suppose?” they’d asked each other time and again.

There was no way of knowing, but apparently none had died yet, and they would die all together, or nearly. Their race might be long-lived, or the Fats might begin the next day and they’d be gone soon.

The Cambrians surveyed the damage from the flood and began to clean up, starting inside Ivor’s and Sorrel’s house, sweeping out the water, wiping down the surfaces, setting the smaller sculptures back on their stands and shelves. Ivor opened the rear shutters and swung out the back door. A slight flow of air began, enough to begin drying out the floor.

“So, what caused all this?” asked Hari later, when they were sitting outside on chairs, the reconstruction of the porch left for another day...or two. “After all these years? I hope it’s not going to be a trend. We’ll have to move a bit higher.”

“Higher” was never much on this flat planet of a few gentle rises and sandy berms and what looked like old meteorite crater rims. No hills to speak of, let alone mountains. No chasms or valleys or even gullies worth mentioning.

Ivor considered his house, the work gone into its making, sawing and planing and hammering and fitting and carving, at first with makeshift tools bartered for food, later with tools they’d made themselves with scrap metal collected several islands away, in a ruined settlement that had died out long before. They’d never found the source of the ore, but there’d been enough scrap from simple hand-powered agricultural devices to reclaim and beat into shape in the forge they’d built.

“Something big, something over the sea far out, where it finally gets deeper. What?”

“A storm,” suggested Sorrel.

“Not in all these pretend years,” said Hayman. “No use thinking of real weather here.”

“And why should it begin now?” asked Tom Davies. “Why now?”

“An explosion,” said Sorrel. “Someone’s figured out how to make a giant bomb and set it off over the sea, an experiment.”

“Never heard of anyone that far ahead, have you? We would know, maybe not,” said Ivor. “Advanced around here means a bit of metalwork with scrap, isn’t it. That’s all.”

“The Walking Frogs? What about them?” asked Sorrel. “We have to think of them.”

No one wanted to think of them.

“You couldn’t call them advanced, could you,” said Hayman, shivering. “More like retarded. Backwards. And besides that, where would they be? Not close enough, or someone would know.”

They all thought of them anyway—the ugly, tall, monstrous, wet-skinned, thin-boned, large-chested, long-fingered, wide-mouthed kidnappers who had brought them here. By mistake, it seemed—they had brought the men from the village of Garth and one wheelchair-bound woman and dumped them on an island and left them to fend. The humans from Garth had made a long and arduous journey to get far away from the Walking Frogs, the Watermen. For a decade, they had worried about being found again.

In the years since, the threat had faded until it was a memory, a dream, a nightmare of long bony fingers grabbing at them, pulling them into the ship, dragging them here and there, poking, prodding. No one wanted to remember that. They all did, though, as if it were about to happen again.

No one knew where the Watermen were, whether they were somewhere on the thousands of islands that dotted the planet’s watery surface.

The smell—no one could forget the smell. Ivor would be walking on the heath behind the cottages, and he’d catch a whiff of something strange—a crushed leaf, hyrax spoor—and suddenly his nose would fill with the stink of the aliens, the worst smell in the world, that had permeated the air in the ship and made their eyes water for all the days of the voyage. When they’d arrived, hungry as they were, they’d taken off their clothes, and scrubbed them and themselves in the planet’s waters even before they searched for food.

No one wanted to remember, but they all did.

“Ye gods, imagine them with the intelligence to make bombs,” said Ivor.

“Anyway,” said Sorrel, “the fag-end of a doomed race, that lot. I hope.”

“What about the Chine?” asked Tom Davies. “We haven’t considered them. Perhaps the Chine are back.”

“Now you’re in the realm of myth again, Tom Davies,” said Hari. “Too much time in the Domes you spent, *dai*, listening to fables and rumors and tall stories.”

“Someone set up those things in the sea,” Tom protested. “And it’s true we wouldn’t have made up the Chine ourselves, but people in the Domes believe. Still, maybe it’s a case of if they don’t exist, they’d have to be invented, and so on.”

“There you go,” said Sorrel, looking out to sea. “Come to think of it, there’s a sea-thing in that direction, if you go far enough, isn’t it. Maybe it exploded.”

They imagined one of the towers flying apart, a circular tsunami spreading across the sea. What would that mean, besides terror and death for fish, destruction to the land-life close to shore?

“Far enough is right,” said Hari. “Far enough is right.”



He remembered very vividly paddling over the sea in a coracle with lovely dark Seel, sailing far across the glassy waters, the little vessel packed with supplies for a long adventure. Long it had certainly been—days and days without any way to measure distances, a homemade map their only guide, nets trawling daily for breakfast and lunch and dinner. Just the two of them and a few stretched hyrax skins between them and the water. A second honeymoon, he’d said, explaining the idea to lovely dark Seel.

Long days and nights together, learning each other again on the flat sameness of the waters, rocking the boat in glee when the mood took them. Seel on her back. Seel on her knees. Seel and Hari every which way, like a calendar of pictures. Seel sitting, smiling down into his grinning face, both happy.

“Far enough is right,” he murmured.

His bones still ached for Seel, lovely Seel, lovely, dark, and quiet Seel. One of the speechless ones, like almost all on the Milk but, thank the absent gods, not sexless, like some. Hari’s fingers twitched as he signed secretly and imagined her signing back in the quick and private way they’d learned, hardly lifting hands from sides.

They had come to the sea tower after ten days of rowing and sailing in the light breeze. It showed on the horizon as a silver arch steadily reflecting the diffuse light of the sky. As they approached, it became massive, solid, filled-in geometry, shiny and silver and stationary, seeming to rest on the surface of the water. In fact, they saw as they got close, its bottom lay underwater, sides sliding through the surface in a perfectly mathematical parabola.

This one, at sea—the omnipresent sea, nameless despite their long years marooned here—was one of six identical that stood equidistant on the planet’s surface at what might have been poles, if the planet had rotated, and four points on the equator, unmoving since the beginning of history, or the beginning of history measured by anyone who could measure. Predating the earliest people, or those who had claimed to be so, the ones who found themselves here first, now long gone of the Fats or old age. The stuff of legend.

The abducted Cambrians thought the sea towers were beacons sending signals to guide spaceships down from the opaque milky heavens. The Watermen were not smart enough to do it themselves.

Seel wanted to swim underwater to explore it, and Hari didn't want her to, and she did anyway, slipping into the water before he could protest, his dread rising. She flipped her way deep under, on her back, looking up, and appeared on the other side before he got there in the boat to drag her in and hug her tight, eyes closed, hair draped. She brushed off his worry and said she could not see the bottom of the tower.

No pictures, as some myth-makers claimed, no faces looking out, just shiny silver reflecting underwater light and rooted on the seabed below. They threw some of the day-before's fish, which fizzed and bounced away as they struck the surface. They got closer and felt a pale warmth they did not like, and withdrew.

If anyone had built it, it must have been the Chine, those beings of myth, or their real counterparts. Whoever they were. Until anyone knew, they were simply the Chine of jokes (*I'll do it when the Chine come back.*) and ironies (*Ask the Chine.*) and philosophical writings by those of that bent (*The Chine as the Eternally Shifting Object of Desire*); that was an idea Hari had brought back from an eastern family, if there was such a thing as east on a planet without a sun and only eternal gray mist to reflect an eternal soft light onto the beings below.

The Chine, the absent and mythical masters of the Walking Frogs, the Watermen who were too dim to do it all themselves.

"Too far to go and see if it's still there," he said, meaning really he would have done it again for the pleasure of Seel's company, but he would not do it now, alone or with another man, just to see it gone or broken or still there—and then what? "Let's just think of moving you two to higher ground."

"Because we'll be dead soon, no reason to worry about solving mysteries," said Ivor. "Just be safe."

"What are the chances, anyway?" asked Sorrel. "Another wave comes, catches us by surprise, we'll probably get out. If not, well, I shan't complain."

So no one set off right then and there to see what might have caused the wave. First, they rebuilt the porch, old men working together, Sorrel watching from her chair. Then Sorrel and Ivor got to sit on the porch again and look at the barely changing sea. They were well-used to its placid nature, its passivity, soaking up their thoughts and images and giving little of itself back. The no-name sea.

“Not like the beach at Abertryfan, isn’t it, around from the estuary, where those rocks make the boiling and thrashing with the tides, a good place to sit. Too quiet, this is, not saying much,” said Ivor. He thought of fast-flowing rivers and creeks and streams where the mountains and hills made them run. “Puts the burden on the looker, somehow.”

“Don’t mind,” said Sorrel. “Don’t mind, really. Get out what you put in, I expect.”

She’d enjoyed many long days of thinking, writing her thoughts, sitting on the porch, letting the flat waters calm her mind. Drama here was a swell, perhaps the remnant of turbulence far out made by mythical sea-monsters battling in the deep.

“Ready to go in, then? Want me to carry you?”

“No, lover, I can manage.” She lifted herself from the chair with a grunt and walked slowly back into the house, each step a serious effort. “We are a hopeless lot,” she said. “Isn’t it. A bunch of old sticks barely able to walk about the place, let alone solve the mysteries of the universe.”

Ivor thought that he did not want to solve those mysteries, he who had spent his life both here and there making things, building houses, carving wood, creating statues—all he had ever wanted to do since he’d been small, on Earth or here.

“Speak for yourself,” said Hari. “I can still jog a bit, you know. Now, I *am* thinking of something.”

“Good move for a change,” said Hayman, settled into his chair, readying himself for yet another nap. “Thinking.”

“Har har de har har,” said Hari. “Let me finish, *dai*, and I’ll tell you what I’m actually thinking.”

“Can’t wait,” said Hayman, closing eyes.

“I am thinking,” said Hari, “of a journey after all.”

Hayman opened his eyes.

“In a coracle?”

“I left mine with the Potters last time I was there. They can take it on one of their boats so I don’t have to paddle the first leg. Do it while I still have the strength, isn’t it, *dai*. See where that wave came from, maybe. See if anyone around the shores knows anything.”

“I’ll come,” said Hayman, his younger self striding along the beach, pack on back, stick in hand. Hayman high on the rock-faces of Cambria. Hayman swimming far out into the bay.

“Don’t be daft, you old bugger,” said Hari.

“All right, I won’t,” said Hayman, remembering the wasteland west of Garth, crossing the hills, a marsh, a long stretch of desert sand streaked with blue and red oils, then the beach and a sea where the waves crashed. “I’ll just bloody sit here and remember, isn’t it. And bloody well nap.”

Hari knew then he would go one more time to search the lair of the Watermen, if only to keep Seel’s memory alive.

He began to catalogue the treks and the voyages he and Seel had done together, side-by-side, her small black figure ahead of his right elbow, at his side by night, running ahead, swimming.

And then the inevitable catalogue of positions, all of them too good to be true.

Seel came back to him a hundred times a day. She would be with him on this adventure. Seel was always by his side.

3.

HARI WADED THE INLET WHERE IT WAS SHALLOW AND PASSED THE Zymat village, walking along the shore to stay out of their way. Dozens of equidistant mud-brick hemispherical huts, painted white using some mineral they'd found and ground—*They must have an igloo gene*, said Ivor—protruded out of the soil on his right as he trudged along. They'd cleaned up all signs of the flood.

Out they came, three of them, in their grumpy insular way, just to observe him passing, to look and turn their backs and hope (he assumed) that he'd leave soon. He got a glimpse of identical hooded faces, a suggestion of dark eyes and flat noses, nothing more. The usual.

Overtures had been made, of course, when they'd decided the Zymats were not dangerous, didn't throw rocks or spears or shoot guns. Not that they'd met anyone with guns except the Watermen. They'd always turned their backs—some humans just didn't like strangers, and that was that.

But they'd done well, building their place slowly, terracing larger and larger sections of slope and cultivating the plateau beyond, growing their roots and leaves. Their small fishing boats were lined up in the harbor they'd dug out by hand, carrying the mud in wooden buckets and using it on their terraces.

The Cambrians had predicted that when they were gone, the Zymat would spread onto the other side of the water and take over the space where the cottages stood. But Hari speculated their dislike, or fear, or contempt, of foreigners would stop them, make them find their limit. They'd rather stand on each others' shoulders than risk standing near a stranger. They might stick to their

place for good. And then they would all die close together. Only the humans brought from Earth were of different ages.

On the right, after the Zymat plantation, the slow slope of the land yielded nothing but acres of low green vegetation, the wild skunk-cabbage-like leafy plant that had kept them alive when they'd arrived. Just greens at first, until they learned which roots could be eaten, and made bows and arrows and spears and slingshots to snag hyrax, and started fires by the scout method. After a few days, they'd made weighted nets and learned to catch the fish, which were, like the faux-cabbage, all of very similar species, living wherever the seas spread their calm soupy waters.

On the left, the flat gray waters. The sea, they called that, as they had done when referring to the distant sea of Cambrian childhood, as in "I've never seen the sea," or, "Are you goin' to the seaside, then, *dai*?" *Just the sea*, Hari thought, trudging along the firm, gray, rounded-gravelly mud of the shore—cabbage on the right, sea on the left, the imaginary Seel just before his right elbow, leading and keeping company at the same time.

She'd been as happy as could be trekking with him over land, even happier if they did it on the sea. Her presence had changed the landscape, enlivened it, especially in the setting-off. Later, the views would change, and there'd be something different to catch the eye. But heading out this way had meant a half-day of green and gray in solid washes, right and left and ahead.

Seel kept him company still, delicious in memory. Sometimes, he'd remember old Family of Man strictures about the flesh—there'd been a few adherents about when he'd been home, a child. His mother Dharmistha and grandmother Ananda had been two of them, cautioning him often as his body began to change, as if this were a threat to his well-being. There had been some other, more sensible warnings about friendship and love versus fleeting sensation.

In the story of Seel and Hari, desire had kept them together and made them eternally lovely lovers, as they told each other many times. They were as sentimentally self-indulgent as could be, knowing they pleased each other so much they'd never break the bond. No fleeting, empty pleasures, but lasting satisfactions.

Love.

Seel-in-memory energized his journey between the skunk cabbage and the sea, the green and the gray, skin prickling all over, hair trying to stand up on end.

Finally, the land opened up, and the skunk cabbage gave way to the scraggly bushes they called scrub oak for its lobed leaves and tough wood, too twisted

to use for much except firewood and sometimes sculpture. Ivor had gone through a phase of making assemblages from series of identical curved limbs, chased into tiny reliefs, but that period of his art had not lasted long. He'd soon gone back to his early style, carving solid sections of thick trunk from old swamp cedars—or rather, their hard-to-find planetary equivalent.

Hari had made a few items of furniture out of scrub oak, too—rustic-looking chairs, a couple of small tables with bandy legs. They'd been traders for a while on the spotty global craft market. On a planet without currency, and not that many people, and not much variety in foodstuffs but no shortage of food, there really wasn't a whole lot of trading going on, although in recent times more people had been setting up shops in the Domes, bringing in wares from their villages to barter.

This was a durable landscape, large swatches of this and that, always enough to survive, short on variety, as if only a few score life-forms had managed to find their niches and survive and then had not changed since forever. Not exactly the mad scrabble for survival it was supposed to be, what he had learned as a child about biodiversity and nature red in tooth and claw. The occasional oddly shaped sport tree or differently colored hyrax was about as much as you could expect.

As if cued by this thought, a black hyrax hopped through the scrub oaks. Hari's mind turned to his dinner and the slingshot and net in his pack. Fish and greens and hyrax, a few different roots—they'd run the gamut of preparations in the first few years. Roast the hyrax, boil the roots, steam the greens. Stuff the hyrax with greens, barbecue it, mash the roots. Wrap the hyrax in greens, cook on hot stones. Stuff the fish with minced hyrax. Stuff the hyrax with minced fish and roots, wrap it in greens. Cube the roots and boil them in a stew with hyrax. And so on and so on. Some would eat the faux-otters and the pseudo-crows and even the near-cormorants, but the folk from Earth could not stomach those.

Hari was getting hungry. As a young man, he'd made it half as far again in this many hours of tramping. Now he had no desire for distance, and besides, this place was special. He set up his kit in a familiar soft depression in the rise above the shoreline, took his slingshot back into the scrub, and sat to wait, stone between thumb and finger, ready to let fly, still as could be.

Here, in the unchanging light of not-home, the place they'd refused to name, there was no dusk or dawn for lying in wait, but it didn't matter. After a time of sitting still, looking through a maze of twisted branches, a hyrax came by, sniffing for beetles or worms, and he potted it with a stunning shot to the head, prod-

uct of a lifetime's practice. He lifted the warm body by the long back legs and clipped the back of the neck with a sharp blow. A small one, but he was not so big, a stringy old man easily satisfied.

He built the fire in the same spot as a day many years before. Two hours later, the remains of the roasted carcass buried respectfully some distance away, stomach full, prayers said, Hari lay down to sleep.

Seel visited, as usual, between waking and sleeping.

Remember this spot, Hari, love? she said, lying by his side, one arm laid over his, her upper arm inside his elbow.

"I do, I do, isn't it," he said sleepily, and let his mind wander back...



That was lunch, way back then, not dinner, his youthful springy legs racing him along the shore. He'd go off to the Domes for fleeting sensations, then back to the homestead to be with his kind, then off again to find the new thing or person.

But he always came back. In self-deprecating moments, he thought he might have a Zymat gene, to crave the fellowship of his own kind so much. He'd travel far and wide, learn all kinds of people, their ways and natures, and still turn up at the Cambrian village like a bad penny.

But the yearning to keep going was just as strong, and the young Hari could not rest while there was more to explore. So far, he had not yet found the base of the Watermen, stuff of myth and legend, rumored to be on one of the myriad islands far from where they'd made their home in exile. This time he would find it, and report back, and they would close the circle for good.

Or steal one of their ships and use it to go home. Real home.

That had been Hari's first trip without Eddie. The others were older, and no one felt like a trip to nowhere. They'd almost all had their exploring days, all who wanted, some of them back on Earth, and now they let him go alone.

"There's ten thousand islands out there, boyo," said Hayman. "More."

"Every story you hear is different," said Tom Davies. "There's a hundred stories all telling you where to go and what they've seen, and none of them match. It's a fool's errand, I'm thinking. But you might be the one to find it out, the truth, isn't it. I'm not saying that you might not be the one. But the chances, well, think of the chances."

"Go on, then, *dai*. I'm staying here," said Ivor.

Hari thought Ivor'd like to go but wouldn't leave Sorrel.

It was a brown hyrax he'd snagged back then, the kind with the lighter stripes along its back, a bigger, fatter one, by chance—plenty of meat on the bone for lunch and a snack later. Fat sizzled and spat in the fire.

He'd got it off the spit and onto a cloth where it was cooling when he heard a light splash and looked up, thinking of fish. A coracle, and sitting in it a kind of human he'd not seen before.

She was small and slim and very dark, almost black, wearing a tan one-piece dress snagged about her waist with a thin rope. Her face was oval and her nose straight. Her muscles showed clear and strong as she paddled the coracle towards shore. As she approached, he saw three fish on a string in the bottom, near her feet.

"Ola!" he said, staring. "Hungry?"

It was worth a try. A few people spoke a little. She looked straight at him as if she might be trying to read his lips, and signed with one hand, the other on the paddle behind her, using it like a rudder to steer the boat.

Gender, but no voice. Interesting. And bloody beautiful as midnight.

He signed.

::Ola! Hungry?::

::Starving,:: she signed back, and a few seconds later, she'd beached the coracle and was walking up the shore to where he stood next to his fire.

Hari knew as soon as she stood by him, fish dangling from one hand, other hand signing all her questions—::*Where are you from? Why are you alone?*:: the same ones he was asking her. He knew then, as his skin tickled from head to toe and a warm feeling seemed to seep from his skin inside him and wash through his entire body, that he was in love in a way he'd never been before.

Chemistry, he tried to call it later, on reflection, and it may have been, some special pheromonal effect, two subspecies giving off chemical signals that amplified each other. Hari offered his fire, and they grilled the three fish, and they ate one each, and each chewed a hyrax leg to the bone, all the time sitting close but not too close.

Eating meant less signing, of course. Hari could not keep his eyes off her and tried not to be too obvious. She was not at all afraid of him, that was clear, although he was half-again her size and she came out of the coracle with no weapons. She kept coming back to the question ::*Why are you alone?*::

Hari explained about Eddie, who had left, probably for good, apparently choosing life in the Domes in the end for his brand of exploration, citing the lack of women back at the settlement.

::You are one of the people who came from Earth?:: she asked, incredulous, eyes wide, one of many looks Hari at that moment began to catalogue and now revisited in his sleep, in his dreams, whenever he wanted to remember Seel.

::One of those born on Earth I am, I am.::

Seel gestured at the sky.

::In truth,:: he said, more aware of his desire to touch the arm she stretched out than the need to explain his origins, Cambria, the Watermen's abduction.

She held out her arms differently, from her sides forward, elbows tucked, palms open to the sky.

::Who taught you that?:: asked Hari.

::I was taught by another one of those born on Earth,:: said Seel. ::So he said,::

::In the Domes?::

::He was teaching in the Domes when I was there some time ago, studying. I learned to pray, that's all,::

::Has everyone in the Domes got religion, then?:: asked Hari, grinning.

::Yes, everyone has been converted to your Family of Man,:: said Seel, grinning back.

::You're funny,:: said Hari. ::May I hold your hand?::

::I am using it to pray,:: she said, smiling even more widely.

::It will not be a sacrilege to use it for friendship,:: said Hari, who wanted more than anything to find out what it felt like to touch her. His entire body had come alive, and he could not stand not knowing.

Her left hand was still extended in the attitude of prayer while her right was signing. He put his right hand on her left, palms touching flat. When he remembered that scene, he saw sparks crackling between their palms.

She slid her palm across his and gripped his wrist. They looked into each other's faces for signs of anything they should fear.

::Come away from the fire,:: he said, shivering, and they stood, holding hands, and walked back away from the shore to a small clearing between the oaks. As they walked they unclasped their hands and slipped them around each other's backs.

They stood together, and Hari held her close and kissed her face, and she let him, and kissed back, which was a great relief—he had been sure but not quite, having never met anyone like her before. A few seconds later, they were helping each other undress, which was simply done, and Hari got his first view of her beautiful dark, dark brown body, small breasts tipped with hard nipples, tight skin over clear muscles everywhere, tidy bush—the body of an acrobat, he'd thought (and told her later).

He felt outshone. He was fit and healthy and energetic, but no prize in the body department, which did not matter, it seemed, for soon they lay side-by-side. Then he was on top, then she was, then they were back to front, and after that head to toe.

It began like that, the long history of Seel and Hari's lovemaking—frame by frame, as he put it, like a comic book, or that calendar he'd seen (as a boy, with Eddie, reading forbidden stuff), each day of the year a different position. They could not get enough then and never could.

Afterwards, they wrapped the leftover food in cloth and packed it away, and Seel offered her coracle to continue the journey, and Hari, of course, accepted. They paddled away along the shore, Hari staring back at the spot where they'd met, the images already burned into his memory.



He sank from reverie to sleep proper, an old man on the cusp of being too old for adventures, bones aching as he shifted on the hard ground. He slept soundly, dreaming hardly at all. When he woke he ate leftover hyrax as he tramped his first paces, seeing signs of the tsunami all along the shore—smelly dead fish thrown up too far to flip their way back, broken shrubs, mud upturned in wet slabs.

On his third day, he came to the harbor of the Potters. A group came out to greet him, in rows as ever, one behind the other, three deep, three wide, as if something in their nature made them adopt the military squad as a natural form and three as a natural number. A tall, non-gendered people, like Seel, they were speechless.

They were almost as numerous, they said, as in the beginning, having lost only a handful of their sixty-six, the magic number of genesis on this planet, although there were tribes of different numbers—forty-nine more common for families now dead. The Potters had gathered on the shore of the sea, and made boats and a harbor, and spent their lives sailing, mostly, and catching and eating fish, and making pottery, which they traded all about and in the Domes.

You could see Potterware by almost every hearth on the planet. Once in a while, one would break, and someone would trek to a market in the Domes, glad of the doing and a change of pace, carrying something or other special in hope it could be traded for a Potter tureen or saucepan.

Hari sat with a threesome at lunch behind their house, a mud-brick cube, in their yard, a tidy, walled square. All their building was the same—walls and floors made of regular light-gray mud cubes air-dried hard as rock, mortared in vertical and horizontal planes, not a curve in sight, not an angle other than ninety degrees. This in contrast to their deep-red spherical and ovoid pots, several of which sat about the courtyard like a geometric display.

They fed him fish grilled on a stick and used a mix of seasonings to make it taste lemony and spicy.

::What about the wave?: he asked when he'd finished and his hands were wiped and free for talking. He'd seen flotsam gathered into tidy piles on alley corners.

::We have three boats out:: said one, gesturing to the west, over the harbor.

Hari pictured Potters in three of their smart little boats with flexible carved masts and oversized flaxen sails making the most of the mild breezes. He imagined them scooting across the sea in silence, occasionally holding up a long, thin arm, fingers signing. He wondered again how that compared to the lives of their kind back wherever their people came from, if they were a seafaring people or just a people of all kinds; if they arranged themselves in ranks, favored right angles in their buildings and curves in their pottery, or if that was an accident of this place.

::Never had one before, isn't it:: he said.

::Never:: they all agreed.

::What do you think?:

::The Chine are back:: said one, getting up and beginning to collect the plates.

Hari watched the tall, lean frame go about the yard, covered in sea-darkened skin and long red shirt. They did not change as much as he did; their skins were smooth, the only signs of age were about the eyes. Of course, the Potters did not know how long they might live by nature. The ones who had died had been killed in accidents. Hari felt a touch of envy and rubbed at the age spots on his forearm.

They all laughed about the Chine.

::Do you believe in the Chine?: he asked.

::If they did not exist, we would have to invent them,:: said one, laughing again.

::There you go, a good old joking riposte to an old philosopher:: said Hari. ::But would you like to study today?:

They looked at each other carefully.

::Not today,:: said one. ::We have to work on our boat, the caulking. Later, if you want to sail.:

::May I help?: asked Hari.

They chiseled out old caulk from between hull planks and replaced it with new material from a bucket kept warm over a slow fire. The caulk was a thick sap sweated from tar-bushes in the same kilns they used for firing their clay, made into a gummy paste that kept its flexibility for many voyages before needing to be replaced.

Hari was glad of the labor and the company. He'd done this work long ago, when they were still using scrub oak for their vessels. They had invented an ingenious way of weaving short, crooked limbs together into a hull, soaking the branches until they were pliable, then letting them shrink tight on each other. Some of those old boats were about, most beached, one or two still seaworthy, recognizable by their knobby texture.

In later years, they'd learned of swamp cedars near the Cambrian colony, a trade had been set up, and planks were cut. Hari's first extended encounter with them after Seel had been as a teacher, bartering his explications of the Teachings as part of a deal involving carving, cedar, pottery and philosophy.

The Potters did not mention Seel, whom they had liked a lot, and Hari did not mention the missing Potters.

After their hard work on the hull, they rested. Hari, too, in a borrowed hammock slung between the sleeping trees down by the water where the breeze, never strong, was pleasant on the skin as they snoozed. The hammock bobbed and swayed. The smell of cooking fish drifted down from the village. He could hear the regular chuck of a stone adze trimming wood, perhaps for a new boat.

Now, he just wanted to daydream, and nap, and he dreamed of Seel.



The coracle bobbed and weaved on the slight chop raised by the breeze. Seel taught him how to use the paddle to maneuver so it didn't spin around like the first time he'd tried, making them both dizzy and sending Seel's laughter across the water. Now they were so far out there was no shore, and Hari had no idea where they were. The breeze dropped, the chop flattened, and they were becalmed on the wide sea.

That first time afloat with Seel was before the days of better mapping. People had a crude idea of how some of the shores lay, but not enough people had met up through trade and adventure to exchange their ideas on this. There were lots of rough maps, some of them quite ludicrous, all of them incomplete.

Hari stared about in wonder. Nothing but a slight, almost invisible swell and the familiar sweet and slightly salty smell of the water, quite drinkable, although many preferred to distill theirs and jar it, for the taste.

::And every drop to drink,:: he said. ::Where are we going?::

::Anywhere you want.::

And she told her story, how she was alone of her kind.

Hari had imagined a race somewhere of Seels, all dark as her, as beautiful as her, as seductive of him and his kind, of Seels a-plenty to visit the Cambrians and bond. His face creased, and he asked why, and thanked the unseen stars for being found by her first of all the ones she might have liked so much.

::Dunno,:: she signed. ::Just me. I have looked, and keep looking, and there are no more.::

::Who had you first?::

::A tribe that way, far.:: She pursed her lips, pointing. ::Tall and skinny. But they didn't like me very much because, well, I was the only one. I left. I learned to live by myself.::

A familiar story, but never alone, thought Hari. Poor Seel.

He imagined hunger growing, thirst, finding water, eating leaves, walking through trees, finding the sea, eventually building a boat.

::You never have to be alone again,:: he said, laying his head in her lap as she paddled, scared already that she would leave him. He could feel the muscles of her body tense and relax, pushed the oar against the sea, turning the blade to let it coast, pushing again.

History in this place was made of dribs and drabs of half-remembered images, traces of legends, ideas cobbled together from bits and pieces of what people said here or there. The absent Chine were the masters of the Watermen. The Watermen's lair lay deep in a jungle, or a desert, or in a basin, on one of the ten times ten thousand islands. You could never map all the islands—the one you wanted floated, a big raft, and that was why. The island moved, so it could not be found, or did not really exist, or was shielded by a spell. The beliefs shifted and turned and faded.

Most people didn't bother too much with them, got on with their lives, such as they were. Lately, there had been a growing sadness among some of the peoples, as if it was not worth bothering, all would be over before long anyway. There were no new people.

"Let me finish this, and then I'll worry about it," said Ivor when Hari had left, chiseling away at his latest—a cornet of hollowed-out cedar, little naked people circling the bell inside and out, some on their way from one to the other, chasing each other with priapic glee.

Only the Cambrians had given sense to memories and legends, in a way, as the only people who had lived somewhere else, knew the Watermen and described them. Now you could see images of them everywhere—cartooned with a finger in drying adobe, formed from clay by children, made of wood by other carvers, fired in glazes on pottery.

::We'll find the Watermen, their place, and then...I don't know what then. Maybe it doesn't matter. But I do want to find that place, I do. Come with me.::

And she did. They cleaved together like night and day, black and brown, an odd pair in their coracle bobbing on the endless seas.



Hari woke slowly and looked about. The hammocks were empty, he was alone; he heard them shuffling about nearby, the sound of bare feet on deck boards. He turned sideways in his hammock, not really wanting to wake, wanting to stay with Seel back then, at the beginning of their voyages.

The Potters were on their boat already, getting the sails ready to hoist, tall, thin bodies moving slowly, talking with fingers raised in rapid signs he could just catch. He saw his name, and they all looked his way. He made himself fall out of the hammock and stumble the ten paces to the dock, still sleepy, trying to clear his head.



Hari woke to a jolt and a grinding noise; the boat's flat bottom was striking sand. He felt stupid, useless, for falling asleep again, for getting old.

They'd eaten a big meal of fish stewed in a kettle on deck. He'd sat propped against the mast afterwards to digest and tried to remember the night stars at home, back in Garth when he was a lad running wild with Eddie on the riverbanks, in the meadowlands, found himself staring at the same old milky sky, and nodded off.

One Potter was already on the beach, pulling Hari's coracle up onto the sand.

He had asked them to drop him on the furthest island of a scattered group that stretched fifty miles, give or take. He dragged his bag from behind his back and rummaged until he found his map and folded it out.

The map was geography and narrative at once, a record of where he'd been—with Seel, by himself, on his trips since a young man. He'd mapped what he knew and what he'd heard of as best as he could, and recorded every trip. He did know where he'd been.

The result was one of the best maps anyone had, copied many times by others he'd run into, often used as the base for their own—the ones who explored, anyway.

The Potters did not, not anymore. They'd copied his map and stored it, and let him update it when he stopped by but didn't bother with traveling much beyond their fishing grounds, not since losing a few of their own. The certain mortality of their race had made them more students of the present and local than searchers for meaning or origins.

::Keep looking, Hari,:: his Potter friends said. ::And let us know. Or stay with us to the end. We love you. All will be revealed.::

Hari still wanted answers, after all these years of finding nothing. He liked music but preferred building a drum.

::Answer's here somewhere, lovely Hari,:: the Potters would say. ::Answer's here. And in the fish.::

::Har har de har har,:: Hari would reply. ::Fish to you, too.::

The Potters firmly believed they had been a desert people wherever they came from, and that fish was not their food. But they ate it and, in the short span of their lives in the Milk, had learned its nature profoundly. Fish ran up and down the poles holding their porches aloft, and on the masts of their ships. Almost every house featured a fish weathervane, and, if not, an otter, the nemesis of fish. In idle moments, they carved fish so lifelike they looked as if they would swim away in the air. They spent hours talking about fish behavior—where they ran best, how they mated, how they tasted cooked this way and that, the colors of their scales, the anatomy of their fins.

::We are fish philosophers, and fish artists, too. And fish chefs,:: they would say, grinning. ::And fish biologists. And the funny thing is, we hate fish! But seriously, everyone needs a hobby.::

Hari shook hands and sat on the beach next to his coracle, watching the Potters sail slowly away on one of the planet's mild breezes. He checked the boat carefully to make sure no seams had broken on its stay in the hold of the Potter vessel.

It smelled of fish. Fish scales glittered all over the hundred hyrax pelts that made its skin, which he had patched and repaired many times over the years since he had built it following Seel's death and the loss of her coracle. In his bag was a paper cone of wax, and needle and twine. New skins were easily available. As if to remind him of this, a fat hyrax hopped onto the beach.

"Good for you I'm full of fish," he told it. "But wait until tomorrow lunchtime, boyo. You'd better not come visiting then."

The hyrax twitched its nose and hopped away.

Hari decided to finish his sleep before setting off, dragged the coracle up high on the gray sand, scooped a depression to steady its round bottom, and climbed in. He curled up, head on his bag, fancied he could smell Seel, and went back to sleep dreaming of her.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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