

LOVE LETTERS TO EARTH

Henry Quicke

Love Letters to Earth

Priestess and anthropologist, 1

Bag People, 5

Dancers, 10

The Mystery of the Spectacular Ending to the Story of the World, 14

Instructions for Creating the Earth, 18

The Reason the World has Ended, 22

The Afterlife, 26

Priestess and anthropologist, 32

Swakes, 37

War, 42

Weather, 47

Wind, 53

Streams of Conscience, 58

For Love, 62

Priestess and anthropologist, 68

Fishing for Lost Souls, 73

The Two Sighs of God, 79

The Town Fool, 83

A Great Victory, 89

The People Who Retreat from Themselves, 94

Actors, 102

Priestess and anthropologist, 109

A pair of tattooed warriors grips the anthropologist's arms and leads him up a hillock to a small round hut. Inside, the priestess, nude as always, shifts her raised knee to keep her hammock swaying.

"Leave him," she says. The warriors release their grips. One of them throws the anthropologist's frayed and bulky backpack to the dirt.

"Why the rough treatment?" The anthropologist has been here for months and speaks her language fluently.

"You've learned too much," says the priestess. "We're going to have to kill you."

"I don't understand. You gave me permission to stay as long as I liked."

She shrugs one shoulder, a habit of hers. "Now you can stay even longer."

Hers is the only naked body that has not lost its effect on him. "I've been planning to write all good things about your people," he says, "if that's what you're worried about."

"All lies," she says. "We've been putting on a show for you."

"I don't believe you."

"We know the most child-like tribes get all the government benefits." She clucks her tongue. "Believe me or not as you wish. You'll be killed either way." She opens her hand and invites him to pull up a mat. "Don't worry, you have until the rain stops," she says. The anthropologist looks over his shoulder. The warriors are gone and, she's right, it's raining again, one of those light-switch rains that could quit just as quickly.

“That’s one of our customs,” she adds. “Don’t you have that scratched into your big black notebook somewhere?”

“Execution rituals. I must have missed that one.”

“I don’t know how. You scratch all day long in your ugly notebook, and for what?”

“It’s my job.”

“That notebook! How old is it? Why don’t you ever make a new one? Why don’t you at least paint something on the cover? It’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen an anthropologist carry, and that’s saying a lot.”

“I’m not really an anthropologist,” he confesses. “I’ve lapsed. I don’t study. I don’t write papers anyone will read.”

“Then what do you do?”

It’s a question he’s been avoiding. “I travel and observe...I’m collecting my thoughts.”

“Into what?”

He’s not sure how to respond.

“If I find a pile of your thoughts lying around, I will carry it out to the shitting place before someone steps in it.”

He starts to laugh, then remembers she’s about to have him killed.

He folds his arms. She taps the edge of the hammock

He stares through the doorless entry. It’s pouring now. The rain cascades through the rain forest’s leaves, overfilling those like cupped palms, spattering those like spatulas. The puddles swell and join hands, climbing toward the hut.

His legs are tired and a little wobbly from nerves. He decides to take a mat after all. He sits at an awkward distance from the priestess, near the entry. For a while, they observe each other out of the corners of their eyes.

The priestess pushes her toes against the hammock cords to get it moving again. The anthropologist puts his forearms on his knees and lets his head sink. He rubs the back of his stiff neck.

His back hurts, too. After all his travels, his endless observations, he wishes he had a comfortable chair for what now appears to be his last hours on earth. He's owed that, at least, isn't he?

He raises his head. "Isn't it also a custom to allow the condemned to live like kings, to bring them food and drink and women, or whatever?"

"You must have us confused with some other people," she says.

"So you expect me just to sit here quietly?"

"I never said you had to be quiet."

"Maybe I'll run."

"If our warriors don't catch you, the jaguars will. You needed three guides just to find us, remember."

Outside, the rain hastens the dusk. After years of moving on, taking leave at the first sign of entanglement, his worst fear has at last been realized. He's overstayed his welcome.

"It is raining," says the priestess. "Soon you'll be dead. Now would be a good time to show me what's in your very ugly notebook."

The idea angers him at first. He doesn't deserve a death sentence for notetaking.

So why should he entertain his killer? After a few minutes of silence he reconsiders.

She's right: he's going to die soon. Why harbor a grudge? He doesn't want to spend his final hours in boredom.

Still, he waits long enough for the silence to register his complaint.

It is dark now, and the rain falls steadily. The anthropologist takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He unzips his backpack and pulls out his ugly notebook. There's a small flashlight in there, too. He has sealed it with duct tape and used it sparingly. It still works.

He opens the notebook and clears his throat.

Bag People

There was a time when the Jooga tribe were notorious collectors. They took everything they could get their hands on, whether natural or man-made, and put it into piles. They even raided the villages of neighboring tribes, harming no one but stealing everything that interested them and some things that didn't, simply to add to their collections. To outsiders, their village looked like a garbage dump, piles surrounding their huts, some taller than the huts, some *on* the huts, some in the village commons, others stretching out well beyond the boundaries of the village, strangling trees and providing homes for some animals, playgrounds for others.

At first, the Joogas had a system of classification that allowed them to put like items in like piles. Spear-shaped objects went in one pile, egg-shaped objects in another. Flexible objects in one pile, brittle objects in another. Daytime objects in one pile, nighttime objects in another. When an object fell into more than one category, the village's Collector-in-Chief would weigh the factors and make the call. The system worked for centuries, until the nearby river became the bearer of a new variety of objects that seemed impossible to classify. The Joogas found floating down the river and amassing on its banks objects which appeared egg-shaped when first discovered, but could

become spear-shaped simply by pulling on the ends. Then there were objects that seemed both flexible and brittle depending on the direction you tried to bend them and on other factors, like the weather. There were also many objects that could be used in both daytime and nighttime, and some that seemed useful at no time. Such objects caused a breakdown in the classification system, and the piles, once neat and orderly, became chaotic and cluttered, and the sheer numbers of items found floating in the river threatened to overwhelm the village.

Then one day it began raining, so hard that the Joogas were driven into their huts, where they watched out their doorways as their treasured piles collapsed in the downpour. The storm continued for days, and soon the banks of the river overflowed, and the Joogas were forced to climb into trees like monkeys just to prevent themselves from being swept away. When the flood surged through the village, all the collections of the Joogas were washed away, as were their huts, leaving them with nothing. Finally, as the waters began to recede and the rain began to slow, the heavens provided them with the greatest object yet invented, an object so useful and well-suited to the Joogas, it had to come directly from the gods. The rain turned from water into bags, and the whole sky was suddenly checkered with falling bags. Some of the bags caught their handles on the branches of the trees and hung there like new fruit, while others turned upside down and landed on the heads of the frightened Joogas. When the rains, and the bags, finally stopped falling, the Joogas climbed down from the trees (some with bags still on their heads, afraid to touch them), sank their feet into the muddy ground, and wept at the loss of their cherished collections.

The Collector-in-Chief called a meeting, to which he requested that everyone bring

one of the bags that had been given to them by the gods. The bags were large, made of plain beige cloth, with egg-shaped wooden handles that opened wide.

“The gods have sent us both a message and a gift,” said the Collector-in-Chief. “The message is that our collections had become too heavy and threatened to break the back of the earth, so the gods decided to wash them away. To replace our collections, the gods have sent us the gift of these new containers, which are objects from their own collections. ‘May we suggest you try these?’ the gods are saying, and as usual we will follow the good suggestions of the gods.”

Thus it was decreed that from now on each person’s entire collection must never exceed the dimensions of his bag.

Almost overnight, the Jooga culture changed dramatically. They rebuilt their village and lived as before, but now they were much choosier about the items they collected, knowing that only so much could fit in one bag. Their lives felt lighter and more concise, and their collections sometimes surprised them with meanings that would have been smothered in the era of great piles.

The Joogas still raid villages, but now they take very little, and if they take more than they can fit in their bags, they return what they don’t use.

“I won’t be needing this,” a Jooga will say, handing a stolen cup back to its owner.

“Oh, so it’s not good enough for you?” the owner will say knowingly.

Almost every Jooga’s bag is full, even at an early age, so that an addition to its contents also means a subtraction of something already bagged. The young Jooga’s bag is often full of flashy items plucked from the river, while an older Jooga replaces such items with subtler ones, more personally and less conventionally meaningful.

Household items used daily--cooking utensils, clothing, personal grooming items--are exempted from the bag's contents. All else is part of the collection. When a Jooga obtains a new and interesting item, he may carry that item around the village for a day or two, showing it to everyone he meets. At night, though, it must be returned to the bag, which is kept in a corner of its owner's hut.

The entire collection is brought out only for special occasions, such as the beginning of a new friendship or marriage. When two Joogas strike up a conversation for the first time, one will suggest an *oog*, a meeting in which two people display the contents of their bags to each other. Sometimes old friends will renew their friendship with an *oog*, too.

At an *oog*, two or more Joogas will take turns pulling out items from their bags. The owner will describe each item, where and when it was found, what it might be used for, and will then tell any stories connected with it, which are often embellished to make the item more meaningful and important.

"This is a nut that fell on my head when I was a boy," said one Jooga man, twisting the nut between his fingers and weighing it in his hand.

The man's wife, a woman well known for the beautiful black beads she'd worn around her neck, had recently died, and his friends had suggested an *oog* to help him overcome his grieving.

"I was walking in the place where the parrots feed," said the man, "and it was the first time I was allowed to walk in the trees alone. The nut frightened me and left a bump on my head for many days. When I picked the nut off the ground, I looked to see who had dropped it. There was a parrot high in the tree above me, looking down at me, first

with one eye and then the other. 'I suppose you want this back,' I said to the parrot. 'I found it first,' replied the parrot. 'But when you dropped it on my head, it became mine,' I said, 'so go find another.' 'I'll scratch your eyes out,' said the parrot. 'You'll have to catch me first, stupid parrot,' I said and then ran swiftly back to the village and put the nut in my bag, swapping out the eye of a fish I had recently found on the river bank."

"No wonder the parrots don't like you," joked another Jooga. "Word gets around."

"That doesn't bother me," said the first man, now pulling out a mummified parrot, the next item in his bag.

The others laughed, until they noticed that the parrot's eyes had been replaced with two of the softly glowing black beads that had once rested snugly in the hollow of his beautiful wife's neck.

They said nothing, out of respect for this mystery, and then they looked away, searching their own bags for a story to tell.

Dancers

It is said that the Lakas are natural dancers because when they walk from hut to hut or village to village they must spin, shuffle, and slide over treacherous, cliff-hugging paths and the knife-sharp rocks that stipple their jagged island. So rarely do the Lakas encounter flat earth that when they do their knees bow and their feet roll over onto their ankles and their torsos sway and totter until they finally collapse to the dirt and struggle for hours to regain their feet, like turtles flipped on their backs. The skips and twists in the Lakas' walk form a kind of dance, and one they must learn early or else risk tumbling down spiked hillsides into the gnashing surf. But that is only part of it. For the Lakas, life itself is a dance, one to be shaped and practiced until it achieves a form so marvelous and real it will survive its dancer.

Every important event in a Laka's life gets expressed in a common language of dance steps. Because of this, a Laka may recall his entire life by joining these steps into one continuous life-dance. The dance embodies the history and personality of its dancer, so much so that Lakas make no real distinction between a person and his dance. If several Lakas long for the company of an absent friend, they may elect someone to perform part of their friend's life dance. Then, magically, the performer seems transformed into the

friend. This ceremony brings comfort to the families and friends of loved ones on long journeys and those who've passed away. It brings back ancestors for the delight of descendants who never knew them and raises long-dead chiefs, whose dance steps still edify and inspire.

A Laka's dancing life begins when its first step is recorded in front of the entire village. The child's father holds its arms while music is played, speeches are made, and fires burn at the cardinal points, the shadows creating new geometries on the rocky earth. Finally, haltingly, the child lifts a knee and steps into a life of dance.

"Let the dance begin!" shouts the village chief.

"And let the dance be named Rakbu!" shout the child's parents, announcing for the first time the name of their child--and his dance.

As the child grows older, his life-dance grows longer and more complex. When he travels, he will add movements to recount each of the islands and peoples he visits. When he marries, a great ceremony will be held in which bride and groom adopt one dance step from each other's life dance, the more sentimental couples choosing each other's first step to signify a new beginning. If the child is foolish enough to grow into a criminal, his crimes, too, will be recorded in the life dance. And the dance steps for crimes are not ones that any dancer would choose to perform: the dance step for stealing is to spank yourself repeatedly on the bare buttocks, and the dance step for adultery is to lie across jagged rocks while others walk over your back.

When a Laka dies, his life dance is performed by friends and relatives in a funeral ceremony that can take hours, with mourners bursting into tears as the dance recalls for them the poignant moments of the deceased's life, though the mourners take solace in

knowing that the deceased's life dance lives on, and that a Laka is never really dead until his life dance is forgotten, which may take several generations or more, depending on the respect and affection he generated and the skill with which he danced.

This is the reason the Lakas are such perfectionists. If they wish their dance to survive them, they must make it memorable, and a memorable dance must have both interesting choreography and skillful dancing.

The choreography of every Laka's dance is determined solely by the important events in his life. For this reason, the Lakas often seem to base their life decisions purely on the dance steps that follow. They'll visit a certain island just to add that island's dance step to their own dance. They'll build a new hut just to add the building-a-hut step to their dance. They have even been known to trip and fall on purpose, breaking an arm just to add the wrist-swinging, thigh-slapping motion of an arm-break to their dance. When spouses fight, they accuse each other of marrying solely to steal their dance step.

This is how the Lakas give shape to their lives and why, for them, every life event is experienced not just for its own sake but also for the sake of its effect on their dance. Some would say that the Lakas' real living takes place only when they dance, so that for them life and art are reversed, and living is worthwhile mainly for the life it brings to art. But perhaps this is the price they pay to fulfill their deepest desire: that upon their deaths they will have shaped their lives into a dance so inspiring and beautiful that future generations will long to dance in their steps, bringing them back to life, leap by leap, shuffle by shuffle.

The Mystery of the Spectacular Ending to the Story of the World

The Ahala believe that before the earth was created, all of the gods gathered around the great campfire for a feast, and Agwan, the god of contests, suggested that they celebrate the plentiful feast with a storytelling competition. Agwan began, and each god in the circle of gods took a turn telling an astonishing and infinitely complex tale, far beyond human comprehension. When all of the stories were told, a heated discussion arose which lasted perhaps thousands of years in human time, but which was of course very brief in the life of a god. Finally, and by the narrowest of margins, it was resolved that the story of the goddess Ma'hal, the silver-tongued goddess of words, was the most interesting, particularly because of its spectacular ending. Thus it is that Ma'hal's story became the story of the earth, of all that has happened since the beginning and all that is to come, including the spectacular ending that is far more interesting and exciting than anything humans could ever imagine.

There was one god who refused to accept the results. La'nat, the goddess of mystification, had come in a close second. Her story, she claimed, was more spectacular in every respect but the ending, and she could have invented a more spectacular ending,

but that would only have detracted from the mysterious spectacle of the rest of the story. The other gods laughed at La'nat, refusing to hear her out. Unappreciated and angry, La'nat vowed to disrupt the story of Ma'hal in every way possible.

This is why, say the Ahala, things don't always go as planned, and why people sometimes get confused, and why people sometimes say one thing and do another. La'nat is at work. An exasperated Ahala will tell you, when you don't understand what he has asked you to do, "You've been kissed by La'nat!" And then he'll knock on your skull.

Despite the steady stream of curses hurled at La'nat, the Ahala are secretly thankful for her. They know that were it not for La'nat, they'd have no will of their own and would speak and act only to play out the prize-winning story already told by Ma'hal. Of course, the important features of Ma'hal's plot are too sound to be corrupted; it's on the smaller details and the lesser events that La'nat works her mischief, so that the minor characters in the story take on lives of their own, and many of the day's decisions fall into the hands of humans, who are fair enough storytellers but lack the sweeping vision and the good judgment of the gods and so are likely to foul things up--only in small ways, but enough to bring a wry smile to La'nat's lips.

To honor the gods, the Ahala recreate their competition with storytelling competitions of their own at the village's weekly campfire. A good story there doesn't make you a god, but it can win you a new and colorful set of evening wear. Then you'll be the toast of the village for many days, with many people admiring your new clothes and praising your storytelling abilities.

Occasionally, an Ahala will tell a story out of revenge. If a man feels he has been wronged by another, he may invent a story that makes fun of the other. Then, when the

story is told around the evening fire, the offender will be forced to buy the story so it is not told again. For this reason, too, the best storytellers are also the best treated. You wouldn't want to offend someone whose revenge story might be so compelling that others would want to hear it again and again; the price will rise accordingly and you'll end up paying dearly for your transgression.

What is the spectacular ending to Ma'hal's story? This is a favorite speculation of the Ahala, even though they know it is beyond their wildest imaginations. Some say the entire world will crumble apart and float up like sparks from the gods' campfire. Others say that when the gods grow tired they will simply stomp out the story and go to bed, which is a spectacular enough ending for weary gods. Some say Ma'hal's story is really a revenge story against La'nat, and this explains La'nat's anger and her desire to steal the story away from Ma'hal. But Ma'hal, in her wisdom, has accounted for that: knowing that La'nat really is the better creator of spectacular endings, Ma'hal has a plan. She will allow La'nat to disrupt the story so thoroughly that she finally rests control of it and smashes it to bits in some wild, mysterious fashion, thus ensuring the spectacular and in that case rather ironic nature of the world's end.

Such a story, so full of intrigue and high drama, say the Ahala, would certainly want to be heard again and again.

They hope the gods agree.

Instructions for Creating the Earth

The Lur believe that God created the earth from instructions He found written into a rock. Then, once He'd finished creating, He stood on the shore of the ocean, which He'd created, and languished indulgently in the sun, which He'd created, too, from the instructions. Unsure of what to do next, He picked up the instruction rock, weighed it in His hand, yawned once or twice, then skipped the rock across the surface of the ocean. God was strong, especially then, in His youth, and the rock skipped with colossal force off the lip of a breaking swell, up through the sky, which He'd also created, past the sun to a height beyond even His reach. Though He didn't create the rock, He was pleased with how pretty it looked in the sky, hanging softly and pale above the ragged waves and the sapphire glow of the world, and He told himself that only He could have had the good luck to be the cause of this. And God smiled.

In time, God would regret his casual rock toss. He had underestimated the persistence of another of His creations, the Lur, who with each generation grew smarter and smarter and understood more and more of their creator's ways, His carelessness, His indifference, and, especially, His jealousy. The Lur know that the earth revolves around a giant rock that we call the moon, and that on one side of the moon are those written

instructions for creating the world. Because God is a jealous God, He holds His hand between the moon and sun to shadow the instructions from the Lur, whom He thinks are too smart for their own good and want to steal His strength. Unfortunately, this occupies much of God's time and energy and allows for the world to run amok with wars, disease, death, and terrible storms.

"Can you blame Him?" ask some of the Lur in God's defense. "Where would God be if everyone knew how to create the earth? Even He didn't know until He found the instructions!"

Others laugh openly at God's pettiness. "Does He really think we'll understand the language of the instructions? Does He really think we'll replace Him?"

"But what if we *can* read the instructions," respond God's defenders. "Think of the consequences, everyone trying to be God, everyone trying to re-create the world. What kind of half-baked world could people like us create?"

Still, the majority of the Lur believe they could do better. When something bad happens, they mumble under their breaths: "If I just knew the instructions...." And they sigh, shaking their heads.

The Lur live in caves along a rocky, desolate coast. Between roaring sets of waves, they dash through tidal pools gathering oysters and battered fish. They keep time on a lunar schedule, waking at moonrise and bedding down at moonset no matter how bright the sun outside their caves. For the Lur, the moon has a sense of mystery about it because it is the only thing not created by God. Who made the rock? Who wrote the instructions? This, they say, is the Great Mystery, from which all other mysteries spring. Any unexplained event, mysterious object, extraordinary behavior, or unanswerable

question is attributed to the power of the inscribed moon. And the Lur hold that power to be even greater than God's. Why else would He expend so much effort to hide it from them?

On days when the moon is full, the Lur spend their time drinking and dancing and feasting, knowing no harm can come to them because, with the instructions facing away, God has both hands free to attend the world. On the other hand, during a new moon, when the instructions would be fully exposed but for God's jealous hands and when the powers of the Great Mystery are at their height, strange things happen. The Lur huddle in groups up and down the beach, heard but not seen in the new moon's darkness, their whispered voices anxious, tentative, swirling in the wind and then swept aside by the exhales of breakers upon the shore. Arguments break out as friends turn against friends, children against parents, and parents against each other. Someone coughs: the healthy grow sick, and the sick get sicker. People who are ordinarily lighthearted sag with sorrow and speak only of the senselessness and absurdity of life. The boldest and bravest quake with fear at the glance of a curious seagull.

At such times, only the Lur's vigilance holds them together, the slimmest thread of hope that an aging God will nod off and let His hand fall from the sky. The Lur are prepared. Two at a time, they keep watch in shifts. The watchers lie on the beach, their faces to the dim aura of the new moon and their hands at the ready with treated bark and a writing stick freshly dipped in warm fishblood. Should the instructions be exposed, the two watchers will copy what they see onto the bark, one from the top down, the other from the bottom up, hoping to get what they need before God stirs from His catnap and sees what He's done.

Even with the new moon about to set and the watchers' eyelids growing heavy, wrists aching from holding their writing sticks, the Lur cannot afford to slacken their vigilance. At any moment, a terrible storm could claw them into the sea, or a neighboring tribe could slaughter their children to appease a strange god, or an unknown disease could arrive on a gust of wind, or the mystery of a life without instructions could rob them all of the will to live. The Lur know that the only remedy for these things is written on the face of the moon, hidden from view, with only a dreamer's chance of revelation.

The Reason the World Has Ended

If it's true that the Shalazh are the most melancholy people in the world, that's only because they believe the world has already come to an end. A Shalazh will stand on a dry mound, surveying the badlands and the perpetual gray skies that surround them, and will imagine what the world was like before it ended, the tall green plants that dripped with sweet nectar, the shafts of sunlight spoking through the trees like music, the cool rains that made you laugh with joy, the charming curiosity of certain extinct animals.

The worst part is that the Shalazh can find no explanation for it. Not that they don't try. The tribal elders periodically debate the causes of the world's end until a consensus is reached. That consensus becomes the official explanation, the one a Shalazh will give to a stranger who poses the question in public. "The world was destroyed by an unsupervised child who dropped it on a stake," a Shalazh will say. If you ask him again the next week, there'll be a new explanation: "The world was rolled across a hard surface by a finicky giant who disliked its irregularities." But if a Shalazh invites you into his home, he'll tell you what he really thinks: "The elders are full of nonsense. Everyone knows that the world ended because that's what worlds do sometimes. The elders think their explanations will make us feel better about the end of the world, but instead the

explanations make us laugh at the elders.”

While it’s true that the elders do come up with some incredible explanations (“The world was on the tip of an arrow that finally reached its target”), they believe they are doing more than comforting their people. The elders believe that if they hit upon the correct explanation, the world may be revived. They think that whoever is responsible for the world’s demise may simply be playing a game, like a child who has hidden something and wants you to guess where it is (“The world was taken from its nest and buried in the desert, where it dried up and mummified before it could hatch”). Or it may be that this certain Whoever wants the Shalazh to come to some understanding of its great power (“The world was a brief happy thought in the mind of a dour God”). Or it may be that there is no Whoever and the world ended because of some natural process (“The world was crushed by the swelling weight of its overactive breeders”). If this latter is the case, then perhaps the elders can find a way to reverse the process (by allowing no plant to reach more than three feet, for instance, and no person to live past forty).

So far, none of the elders’ explanations has worked. Their world is just the same as it has been for generations: barren, depressing, difficult. Since the world ended, the Shalazh have been forced to eat rodents and roots--small, tasteless things that barely survived the destruction.

The Shalazh dress in black, in mourning for the end of the world, and they speak in hushed tones, as though they’re attending a funeral. Their dark eyes are moist with sorrow, but most are too stoic to cry. They say that once the gates of sorrow are opened, they’ll spend their whole lives crying for the lost earth, and what’s the point of that?

Instead, they gaze into the long distance and imagine for themselves what the earth

was like. Then, when they gather in small groups, they entertain themselves by describing the earth as it once was, the singing birds darting among the branches, the cold brooks chattering over stones and smoothing them into disks, the black mud you could scoop up and squeeze between your knuckles, the fragrant breeze that spoke the language of flowers, the first taste of fruit on your tongue. In these conversations, the Shalazh take on a changed aspect. Their moist eyes sparkle, they throw their heads back and laugh with open mouths, they slap each other on the shoulder, their voices strong and clear and their words quick, as if they are remembering the good times they'd once had with the deceased. At some point, though, one of them will remember that the deceased will not be returning, and a look will cross his face as though he now regrets all the breathless pleasure he'd just allowed himself. The others in the group will see that look and feel ashamed at their pleasure, too. The conversation will fall quiet, and soon the Shalazh will go their separate ways to dig up roots or catch a field mouse for supper.

A splinter group of Shalazh have quietly ignored the explanations of the elders. They are tired of explanations and want to abandon the false hope of bringing the world to life again. They meet outside the village in a dried riverbed, and there they allow themselves to cry openly for the dead earth. The elders are not unaware of these heretics. Sometimes they stand on the bluffs above the dried riverbed and watch in silence as the others sob, hands on knees, tears dripping off their faces.

The elders don't discuss it, but each to a man wonders what will happen if the heretics are allowed to continue. And each to a man imagines the heretics' tears pooling together on the dried riverbed, the pool beginning to flow, making chattering brooks, and the brooks joining into wide rivers, and the rivers pouring into deep seas, and soon the

earth springs to life again, the trees and plants shooting out of the mud, the birds darting and chirping, and the sun finally showing its face again, its spokes of light piercing the hearts of the Shalazh like Cupid's arrows.

When will enough tears be shed to bring the world to life again?

That's a question both elders and heretics wish to avoid.

The Afterlife

The Umbas live in a chaotic and fertile rain forest, where contorted trees scuffle toward the light and vines weave themselves daily into nooses, whips, and webs. Life's cycles seem concentrated there into vivid tableaux: youthful plants and animals sailing close-hauled toward the sun, others falling away to the seething, regenerative cauldron on the forest floor--huge leaves tumbling like wounded birds, flowers and fruits like guillotined heroes, small animals like cliff divers.

The intensity of life and death in the forest makes the Umbas eager to participate: because eighty years is too long a wait, they die young. And because death for them is a state of grace, they die often, passing away and reviving themselves perhaps dozens of times in the course of a normal life span.

When alive, Umbas are obsessed with order. If they decide they need a new village, they walk off a plot of ground exactly one hundred sixty three steps on each side. Then they take machetes and cut down every tree, bush, vine, and weed within the plot. When the cuttings are removed, they have a perfect square of packed dirt on which to build their huts, which measure exactly six steps on each side and are made from a single tree, the walls of rectangular planks cut from the trunk and the roof thatched neatly from

the leaves. Inside, there are one-step by two-step sleeping mats woven from sweet-smelling vines.

Umba society is steeply hierarchical, with strict codes of behavior and a rigid division of labor. The tribal chief has four ranked assistants who are local chiefs for the four known Umba villages in the forest. Each village chief in turn has three assistants, the first an information officer who gathers reports of suspicious and unbecoming behavior, the second an enforcer for the chief's rulings on such behavior, and the third responsible solely for matters of the dead, which include death announcements and, occasionally, burial.

Every man in the village works for one of these three assistants, and each man is ranked by age. The women work for their husbands, first wives ranked higher than second. Children answer directly to their mothers and are ranked by their ages. In this way, the government of the village runs smoothly: every member of the tribe is also a member of the government. No one can complain about the administration.

Social codes dictate almost every aspect of Umba behavior. An Umba of a lower rank, for instance, may not look an Umba of higher rank in the eye, which means, because all Umbas are ranked, that living Umbas never have their glances met. Neither may a lower ranked Umba speak first to a higher ranked one. If an Umba has information to report, he must stand in his superior's presence until commanded to speak. Thus, idle conversation is rare among living Umbas.

On the other hand, when Umbas die, they may do as they please.

Sometimes the Umbas die for only a few hours, sometimes for a year. With practice, it's said, the dead learn to make their bodies rot. That's a sign to the living not

to expect them back.

An Umba can die in a variety of ways. He may sleep late one morning and not be roused from his sleeping mat. He may eat too much, or not enough. He may be on his way to the minister of the department of enforcement for punishment when, walking on one of the rock-lined, arrow-straight paths, he may suddenly clutch his chest or his throat or trip and fall a little too hard. If something like this happens, an officer of the department of death must inspect the body and then relay his observations up the chain of command to the director of the department of death, the chief's assistant, who reviews the symptoms.

Are the eyes closed? Check.

Do they not open when the body is shaken? Check.

Does the body not stir when its name is called? Check.

If these conditions are met, the director declares the fallen Umba dead and then reports this information (with downcast eyes) to the village chief. The death announcement descends the chain of command to the small crowd that has gathered around the fallen man. Then the officer who first discovered the body announces to everyone, "This man [or woman] has been declared dead by his greatness the director of the department of death, whose decision is approved by the royal supreme chief of our village. Let it be noted by all."

The crowd disperses and returns to its daily business. Shortly thereafter, the dead Umba also gets up and begins life as a member of the deceased.

For an Umba, death can be an attractive alternative to living. A dead Umba is constrained by no social codes and needn't obey any laws. He can look at who

he wants, speak his mind to anyone, travel where he wants and sleep where he wants.

A dead Umba may laugh in the face of his still-living superior. A dead man may steal vegetables from a garden, or pluck a bite of meat right off a living man's fire. A dead woman may sleep with a living woman's husband, or a dead man with a living man's wife (living Umbas explain this with their own versions of the incubus and succubus). Dead Umbas habitually transgress against the living in countless ways, including theft, vandalism, and bawdy practical jokes. They may be as troublesome or coarse as they like, without fear of the consequences.

Because, after all, the living do not recognize the presence of the dead. A husband and wife might be having sex before an audience of dead voyeurs, but of course the couple feel no shame—the staring eyes of the dead don't register. The dead may shout in the ears of the living, but their voices go unheard. If the living think they hear something and react as though startled, someone will laugh, "You must be hearing ghosts." And if the dead trip up the living or shove them to the ground, onlookers will simply call them clumsy.

Another advantage of being dead is the freedom to socialize. Umbas as far apart in life as a second level officer and an eighth level officer's second wife may, in death, look each other in the eye and carry on a friendly and aimless conversation. The dead rejoice in gossip, since they are experts at uncovering secrets around the village. Some who plan on being dead for months or longer even build huts and marry, but there's a danger that because the living consider the mysterious huts unoccupied, they may one day take machetes to them and plant perfectly square gardens in their places.

The dead often go out into the forest at night and hold outrageous and orgiastic parties, making a mockery of the solemn density of life around them. They dance, sing,

and howl like the living would never do. They strip themselves naked and romp like shameless animals. They concoct a pungent alcoholic beverage called the Drink of the Dead, and they get so drunk that if they were alive they'd be hauled in front of the village chief himself for caning (and then they'd wish they were dead). Sometimes the dead come running through the village in rowdy groups, shouting and banging on huts and vandalizing property. The living, if they notice anything at all, will mistake this for a storm.

At some point, the Umbas get tired of being dead. The bacchanalia wears on them, and their natural desire for order and propriety takes over. When this happens, they return to the spot of their death and lie down in the position of their death. After a few minutes, someone will come along and say, "I believe this body is stirring!" The message is sent up the chain of command to the director of the department of death.

Is the body breathing? Check.

Does the blood move beneath the skin? Check.

Does the body stir when its name is called? Check.

If these conditions are met, the dead Uмба is then declared living, the ruling is passed down through the ranks, and the officer who first noticed the body announces to the small crowd, "This man has been declared living by his greatness the director of the department of death, whose decision is approved by the royal supreme chief of our village. Let it be noted by all."

The man then opens his eyes, careful not to look at any of his superiors, gets up, and returns to his hut to resume his carefully regimented life.

No Uмба may be held accountable for any action performed while dead, of course,

because no living Umba recognizes a dead one. Neither may an Umba repeat any information learned while dead or relate any experience of being dead, which is a good thing, because most of a dead Umba's behavior would cause acute embarrassment in life.

Still, the revived man feels a sadness he can't fully explain, and which will eventually lead him back to life among the dead. He has made friends in death that he'd never have made in life. He's done and seen things in death that he never could have in life. He's fallen in love a dozen times over, changed his name and ways a dozen times over. He's learned a new dance for each night of the week, a new song for each morning. Back from the dead, his memories of it already fading, he knows he's lived more each night of his death than in a hundred nights of living.

The rain is not letting up. The anthropologist moves his flashlight beam over the walls of the priestess' hut, making random designs on the thatching.

"I don't understand why you use these fake lights," says the priestess. "There is a reason for darkness. What can you see with your light that you don't already know is there?"

"Sometimes I forget what's there," says the anthropologist.

"You must have a poor memory."

He shines the light in her eyes and takes some minute pleasure in her squint.

"You're right. I was remembering how only yesterday I watched a gentle and beautiful priestess perform a jaguar dance around the fire. Now I see she's an executioner."

"In that case your memory's just fine. It's your light that's flawed." She holds out her hand. "Let me show you."

The priestess slides the beam over her calves and knees, up and across her rounded hips, circling her lower parts, flashing between her soft brown thighs. His eyes follow the motion of the light, but it's the shadows that imprint themselves. The light, he decides, is only as good as the darkness around it.

She tosses the light back to him.

"Anyway, what is there for you to remember when all you do is take notes?" she

asks. *“All those times I was dancing, you were just leaning against a tree scratching in your notebook. You never noticed how I was dancing just for you—and laughing at you, too.”*

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s no such thing as a jaguar dance, it’s just something I made up to get you to dance with me. But you never did. This is why you must be beheaded. Maybe then you will dance.”

“Limply,” he points out.

“That’s better than nothing.”

“I thought you said I was going to be killed for learning too much.”

She shakes her head. “Probably not.”

“Then I’m free to go?”

“No, you’re still going to be killed, but not for the reason I told you.”

“Then why? For stealing your people’s spirits with my notes?”

“Sometimes you talk like an anthropologist. Very disappointing.”

“Why then?”

“You insist on knowing everything!”

“Humor me!”

“Okay.” She drags a finger down her round cheek and sighs. “Because any man who sleeps with the priestess must be executed.”

He shines the flashlight beam on her face again, tries to read if she’s joking.

“But I haven’t slept with you.”

“Now you know the reason I had you brought to me.” She turns away and lets

one arm fall over the side of the hammock.

The anthropologist watches her loose wrist swing with the hammock as he waits for his anger to finish rising. "You shouldn't have lied to me," he says.

"You should have taken better notes. Then I wouldn't have had to," she says.

"At least you are being killed for a good reason." She moves her wrist to her forehead.

"And what if I don't sleep with you?"

"Then you'll be killed for the first reason."

"Because I've learned too much?"

"Yes. And then at least I won't have lied to you after all."

The anthropologist thinks about this. "So I'm down to two choices," he says. "I'll be killed either for something I've already done or for something I haven't yet done."

"Why should you be different from anyone else?"

He shakes his head. "Sometimes you talk like a priestess," he says.

"It's one of my duties."

He stands up and turns his back to her, shining his flashlight out into the rain and the pitch-black forest just beyond his beam. Should he make a run for it? He's days away from any road or passable river, a week or more from the airstrip. In the darkness he'd be easy game for jaguars and anacondas or the night versions of a hundred other animals that are harmless in daylight. What good would a notebook and flashlight be to him out there?

Still, what choice does he have? He's trapped between capital offenses.

It occurs to him that maybe the priestess sent away the guards on purpose, to

make him consider his manner of death and reach his own decision. Does he set off alone, or die at the hands of others? Does he leave his fate in nature's hands or humans'?

If he wants to live, and he does, the difference, he decides, lies only in the quality of hope.

In that case there's no question. He's been a professional anthropologist, then a lapsed and lazy one, and now he'll be a dead lover. Out in the rain forest, in the middle of the night, he'd be nothing but a piece of meat.

He can't save his life, but he can extend it. Before this lapse in judgment, he'd measured his life in timely departures. Now he must survive by strategic delay. He'll have to convince the priestess that they are moving ever closer to satisfying her desire. Small reversals are possible, so long as they are offset by what follows. If the reversal is too distracting or the delay so long that boredom overtakes it, she'll lose her desire and have him beheaded for notetaking. On the other hand, if he satisfies her fully, he'll be beheaded for sleeping with a priestess. It's the art of foreplay, with consequences.

He looks at the priestess' nude body. He has watched her dance, admired her, and felt an ache he knew even then was dangerous. He can no longer distract himself with notetaking.

"Is there room in that hammock for two?" he asks.

The priestess turns on her side and slides her hips over. "I thought you'd never ask."

The anthropologist climbs in next to her, armed with the only things left for his defense: his notes and flashlights, and the stories and shadows they make.

Swakes

The Swakes don't stand out as tourists do. They blend in, chameleon-like. When they travel to a new country, they learn the language fluently, and they speak with no accent because they have no language of their own. They adopt easily to the customs of a country because they have no customs of their own. They walk, talk, and behave in every way as though they are natives of the country they visit.

Even the color of their skin changes. In a country of dark people, the Swakes' skin will darken quickly in the sun. Maybe they won't be quite as dark as the majority of the inhabitants, but if they act like locals no one will notice. Then, in a country of light-skinned people, the Swakes will lose their tans quickly. Maybe their skin will be a little darker than most, but when they speak the native tongue so gracefully, who can argue that they aren't natives themselves?

It is said that by the time a Swake reaches adulthood, he knows all the major languages of the world and half the minor ones. This is because the Swakes never stay in a country longer than a year. Why should they? They have no cultural ties to the land or people, so at the slightest inclination they move on. And they travel lightly, carrying only the clothes on their backs, since they keep no souvenirs. Once they reach a new land, their

old clothes are exchanged for local attire.

The Swakes don't carry money from one land to the next, either, because they know they can fit in well enough to get jobs upon arrival. And they know most kinds of building techniques, so in each new land they build their own dwelling, one that harmonizes perfectly with the local architecture and environment. In lands where the Swakes would be looked upon strangely for building their own houses, they dress up in work clothes and pretend they are professional builders. They build modest, unassuming dwellings, and after a few months they abandon them and move on.

The Swakes have no common religion, mythology, or value system. Instead, they adopt the beliefs of the country they're in, attending churches, synagogues, or temples and worshipping with the locals. Neither do they have any common ceremonies for rites of passage. Rituals to solemnify death and to celebrate birth, puberty, and marriage are determined by the land the Swakes happen to be in at the time. However, because the Swakes know most of the cultural ceremonies in the world, they will often travel to a particular country to take part in the ceremony of choice. A Swake couple who wishes to be married in their bare feet, for example, will remember a country with barefooted marriages and will convince their families to travel there. Then the Swakes will leave unnoticed in the dead of night, traveling by plane, train, foot, or car, arriving in the new land, also unnoticed, and also in the dead of night.

It's not clear when the Swakes first began to travel and where from. If the Swakes know, they aren't saying. It may be that the Swakes have no native land. Or it may be that they carry their native land with them as they travel from country to country. Some say that the Swakes have no culture at all, except for traveling, and that they don't even

deserve a name. But others argue that the Swakes do have a culture; it is culture in the abstract, a culture of set patterns but infinitely variable form, observable only to other Swakes. They communicate in subtle ways, too subtle for anyone but Swakes to recognize. They recognize each other even in large crowds, and then they greet each other using the greeting custom of the locals, the language of the locals, even calling themselves by local names. They talk about local subjects—local politics, perhaps, or sports teams, or shopping bargains, or food. To passersby, they are just another couple of locals chatting the way locals do. But within that conversation that others hear, they are also having a conversation in Swake.

What do they say? Probably little. It's something, but it's not something one can put into words. The effect is of a general acknowledgment of their Swakeness, a knowing exchange of metaphors for their nonexistent homeland. Swakes renew their friendships this way, and they renew whatever it is that makes them think of themselves as Swakes. On certain rare occasions, they tell each other where they are going next. This is how word gets around when the scattered Swakes agree to meet. They choose one land and gather there by the hundreds or thousands for a festival. The festival may take the form of a party or a dance or a political convention or whatever local options there are for gathering in large groups. Locals may even be in attendance, never knowing that they are surrounded by Swakes. After all, the Swakes are singing the local songs and dancing the local dances and telling jokes in the local tongue. But those dancing Swakes, so much like the locals, somehow apply their own pattern to the dances. How they do it isn't clear. They may alter the movements of the dance just slightly, or their steps may draw out a design on the ground that is familiar only to Swakes. And when the Swakes sing the

songs of another culture, the inflections in their voices follow a pattern known only to Swakes. Or maybe it's that they are sometimes a little flat and sometimes a little sharp, but in a sequence known only to Swakes. When they speak in conversation, they use the local tongue but speak in a grammatical pattern that is meaningful to other Swakes. Or they alter the tone of their voices according to a Swake tonal pattern.

Wherever the Swakes marry, they do so according to local custom, but the real Swake ceremony is taking place unnoticed to all but the Swakes. They may marry in a church in Mexico, with both Swakes and non-Swakes in attendance, but the Swakes see one thing and the non-Swakes see another. The Swakes see the pattern in the steps down the aisle. They hear the inflections in the vows. They notice the changing postures of the bride and groom. They count the blinks and pay attention to the fidgeting hands. They notice the angle formed by the heads as the bride and groom kiss. They notice the arc of the bouquet as it flies through the air. And when they congratulate the bride and groom, they do so in Spanish, but with a pattern in the words and pauses that also congratulates them in Swake.

It's not known whether the Swakes ever had a physical aspect to their culture. If so, they've likely forgotten it. Now their culture survives only by clothing itself in other cultures, and if the world's cultures were destroyed tomorrow, leaving only the Swakes to carry on, the Swakes would not know how to behave. Their patterns, which are surely beautiful in themselves, would be meaningless without the borrowed cultures to express them. The Swakes would probably wither and die. Or else they'd immerse themselves in animal cultures, grunting and snorting and foraging for food in patterns that reaffirm their Swakehood.

There are some Swakes who've lost their way in the world, having spent too much time in one country and without the company of other Swakes. They begin to doubt if they are still Swakes. They look desperately for patterns in others, something that gives them a secret message. They create subtle patterns in their own behavior, hoping others get the message. They'll pass someone on the street, look into their eyes, notice the way they blink, and will wonder if a message has passed between them, something only a Swake would understand.

War

The Fachee believe that during the great flood, which lasted thousands of years, fish were the undisputed rulers of the earth. Of course, the ruler of the earth is nothing compared to Wah, the ruler of the sky, who can cause the world to flood or dry up on a whim. So after a long period of rule, the fish became jealous of Wah's power and complained to Wah. "What good is ruling the earth if we can be dethroned on a whim?"

"Good point!" said Wah, who with a single wag of his finger then withdrew the floodwaters and with them the fish's power. Wah decided that in order to keep the creatures of the earth appreciative, or at least uncomplaining, he would keep them occupied in a permanent state of battle. So he invented a wide variety of creatures and set them loose upon the earth, explaining to them that a contest had been declared and that the winner would have complete control over the earth and would answer only to Wah. He relegated the fish to the lowest ranks of the animals.

The Fachee are high up the food chain, but they take their battle just as seriously as the other animals. They know the stakes are high; the smallest error could result in their subjugation to a junta of skunks.

These are the warrior traits the Fachee believe are in their favor: they are, on

average, more intelligent than most creatures, which allows them to coordinate complex battle plans; their voices, on average, have a greater tonal range than other creatures, so that their communications on the battlefield are more finely tuned with meaning; they are better, on average, at throwing things (rocks, spears, arrows from bows), far better than their closest throwing rival, the eagle, whose bombs are rarely accurate and damage little more than pride.

These are their weaknesses: they have dull and quickly-decaying teeth, bad for jaw-to-jaw combat and a sometimes painful distraction in the heat of battle; their two-legged gait is slow and somewhat awkward, so that most four-legged creatures could overtake them in a retreat, laughing at the human awkwardness as they stretch their jaws out to nip the skin off a Fachee's ankles; they have no fur, so they must hunt other animals to steal their skins; they sometimes act against their better judgment, proceeding rashly into battle, or challenging a much larger animal out of pride alone; and their children have a tendency to wander off.

Wah gave each species of animals its own set of advantages and disadvantages, so that no one animal has the clear upper hand. The grizzly, the Fachees' most frightening rival, is strong and intelligent, but is a poor thrower and has such a weakness for fish that a man with a rock can sneak up on and fell a fishing grizzly with a single well-aimed throw.

The Fachee are boastful about their victories and use every opportunity to fortify each other with pride. When they hunt down a deer and kill it with a single arrow they say, "Look at that, could a grizzly have done that?"

"No," someone will respond, "we are clearly superior to grizzlies."

At dinner, the women will make a thick and flavorful stew with the venison, and they'll say, "Taste this stew. Could a squirrel have made that?"

"No," is the correct response, "we are clearly superior to squirrels."

To an outsider, such talk makes the Fachee sound insecure. But the Fachee don't live in big cities where they can go to the zoo and see animals in cages or walled compounds. They don't walk out of their apartment buildings and find dogs and pigeons begging them for scraps of food. They have to find other ways to reinforce a sense of natural superiority.

One might expect that with so much at stake, the Fachee would slaughter animals indiscriminately. But the Fachee don't underestimate their foes. They believe that an all-out slaughter would cause many species of animals to ally against them, and the Fachee, as boastful as they are, know they would not stand a chance in a one-against-all battle, even with superior intelligence and throwing ability. Instead, the battle is fought mainly in skirmishes--five Fachee meet up with an angry bear, or a pair of eagles dive-bombs a stray Fachee child. At this rate, the battle might take thousands of years to win, but the Fachee are long-term thinkers, and in the meantime, the world remains in relative balance, no species ever gaining a clear advantage. The lives of the Fachee maintain the weighty sense of purpose that comes with dedication to a cause, while their occasional victories help reassure them that they are making progress.

Only once have the Fachee singled out another species for annihilation. It began one day when a woman awoke in the village to find a pair of groundhogs plundering last night's leftovers.

"Get out of here, you bastard groundhogs," she said, in the usual way that Fachees

will try to put down other creatures. Such intrusions had happened before, but this was right outside the woman's tent, so the insult rankled her. She sent her son to follow the groundhogs and teach them a lesson--beat them with a switch, maybe, or throw dirt in their holes. When the son returned, he was shaking with fear.

"Mother, they have surrounded us," he said, claiming to have found nests of groundhogs ringing the village. A council of elders was called and a state of emergency declared. Scouts were commissioned to scope out the extent of the siege. The elders believed that the groundhogs' plan was to steal all the Fachees' food and starve them into submission. Many feared that if the Fachees didn't submit, the groundhogs planned to sneak into their tents and dig their oversized teeth into the napes of their necks. Something had to be done.

A war party was formed, and the party fanned out through the woods, chasing, digging up, and spearing every groundhog they could get their hands on. They stalked and ambushed them. They formed circles and chased them inward, tightening the noose on the swift and slippery but not very bright animals, until they had trapped and slaughtered as many as they could find. The carnage lasted three days and nights, and no one could sleep until the battle was won.

And then, when the elders were satisfied that the Fachee had proved their superiority and taught the groundhogs a lesson, they instructed the war party to capture the last two groundhogs alive, one male and one female. The frightened and defeated creatures were brought before the elders.

"You have once again proved to us your foolish and inferior nature," said the elders to the groundhogs. "And we, as usual, have shown ourselves to be stronger, more

intelligent, and better communicators than you. You were courageous warriors to have surrounded and besieged our village without our knowledge, but that, as you see, was not enough.”

The groundhogs, either out of fear or disdain, turned their faces from the elders and tried to squeeze themselves from the vice grips of the strong Fachee warriors.

“And so we have proved our natural superiority to you, but like all naturally superior creatures, we have the capacity for mercy, and this is why we are letting you go. Just as the great Wah let loose all creatures of the earth in pairs to multiply and run free, so we release you to multiply your species on the condition that you will, with your meager communication skills, teach the generations of groundhogs after you never to challenge us again.”

With that, the groundhogs were released and scampered off into the woods.

That is why the Fachee are kind to groundhogs. They know that the groundhogs will never wage another war against them. Now, when a Fachee hunts in the woods, or collects berries, or strolls on a moonlit night with a loved one, he always brings little scraps of food to throw to the groundhogs who come begging.

Weather

The Ailats live on a small, flat island, pretty but not breathtaking, green but not lush, pleasant but not too popular with tourists, owing to the eccentricities of the inhabitants. In the days when travel guides bothered to mention the island, they called the Ailats “erratic and possibly schizophrenic.” One guide related a typical experience for tourists: *“One tranquil afternoon on the wide but seaweed-strewn beach, a friendly waiter ambushed us with a pair of strawberry daiquiris he explained were compliments of the hotel manager. We twisted our gaze to the pool area and espied the white-suited manager waving jovially and beaming our way. The waiter refused his tip with a shy smile. As we sipped our delightful red concoctions, the beach seemed to us suddenly cleaner, the brown sea suddenly bluer, and the dark clouds on the horizon but a minor annoyance. We debated an extra star for the hotel and began to revise upward our lukewarm write-up of the island itself. Then, before we knew it, the threatening clouds were upon us and the thunderous deluge struck us before we’d quite hunched up the beach, trying as we were to protect our half-finished drinks from the slings and arrows of tropical weather. To our astonishment, we reached the glass doorway just in time to behold the manager locking us out with a twist of his pudgy fingers. He scowled, called*

us 'colonialist exploiters,' and spat disgustingly at the glass as we pounded and pleaded. When at last he opened the door, it was only to grab our daiquiris, throw the liquid in our faces, and retrieve the tall glasses for himself. To add insult, our formerly friendly waiter then crept up behind us, stole our beach bag, and ran off with all of our money. Needless to say, if our editors granted us the discretion to use negative stars, this island would receive five of them...."

The one hotel is now abandoned and the tourist industry virtually extinct, but the Ailats live comfortably, pulling fish and mollusks from the sea, vegetables from their gardens, and fruit from the abundant trees, trading with neighboring islands for other necessities, and governing themselves with a small assembly that meets only in times of crisis.

One such crisis was a recent drought. The drought did little to affect the Ailats' food supply--some vegetable gardens might have dried up, but the sea never failed in its generosity. Nor did it affect their water supply--the freshwater wells flowed on demand. But the unchanging weather did affect the Ailats psychologically. During this time, the temperature fluctuated little. The sun shone relentlessly all day long, and at night the billion-eyed sky gazed untwinkingly. The breeze drifted offshore and back but never turned gusty. Distant storms remained as aloof as passing ships. Meanwhile, the many and varied personalities of the Ailats shrank toward a single, sluggish monotony.

Normally, the Ailats' personalities are as restless as their weather. In fact, every Ailat has a personality that fluctuates in exact proportion to the changing weather, which is why the travel writers were treated so differently in the storm than they were in the sun, and why the drought caused an island-wide malaise.

Consider, for instance, an Ailat woman whose personality is dominated by thrift. That means that, depending on weather conditions, the woman will be either more or less thrifty. On a calm, sunny day that woman may be disinclined to make any purchases and may plant a garden to cut back on her food costs. If the wind picks up and a few clouds move in, the same woman may decide to visit the local store and purchase some seedlings to save herself some time and effort in her garden. If a thunderstorm moves in, she may decide to scrap the garden idea for a while; she might even spend half her savings on a catered dinner party. In a hurricane, the woman would take all of her money and throw it into the angry sea. Or consider a man whose personality is dominated by sociability. On a calm day, that man will be outgoing, gentle, talkative, eager to please. When the wind stirs and clouds form on the horizon, you might overhear him make a joke at his friend's expense. In a storm, he may grow anxious to leave "these obnoxious idiots" at a party and retreat to his home. In a hurricane, he may brave the winds and the flooding to break down the door of his best friend's house and spit in his friend's face.

To the Ailats, storm-time and calm-time are the point and counterpoint of life's argument. In storm-time, a shy person will become bold, a depressed person will grow elated, a timid lover will become passionate, a bore will become charismatic, an honest person will become a liar. And of course these things work in reverse. A person who is mean-spirited or wasteful in calm-time becomes friendly or miserly in storms.

Knowing this allows the Ailats to predict their own and others' behavior in ways that psychologists and politicians only dream of. Say, for instance, a woman is attracted to a man who shies away from her during calm-time. She knows that during storm-time, she can brave the wind and rain and visit his house, and he'll be waiting for her. With the

storm raging around them, they'll make love passionately —on his bed, in his kitchen, perhaps even bursting through the front door and out into the rain, rolling in the mud if necessary, the lightning splitting trees all around them. The man wouldn't care--he's become a passionate lover who desires her more than anything. In the morning, when the world is still and calm-time has returned, the man will insist that the woman leave him alone and will beg off the foolish promises he made the night before. As the woman leaves, she'll notice a line of clouds on the eastern horizon, and she'll know to expect those same promises again tonight.

The island of the Ailats lies directly in one of the favorite paths of hurricanes. Every few years, they are struck by all the chaotic and destructive forces of nature. As with other islands, the Ailats suffer incredible damage and loss of life, but for the Ailats, the destructive force of the wind and water is aggravated by the personality extremes reached at the height of the storm. Those who in calm-time are introverted, shy, timid, reserved, cautious, bashful, skittish, wary, or fearful will rush out into the hurricane, emboldened by storm-time. They stand on the beach and shout obscenities at the approaching storm. They take suicidal dives into the rabid waves. Meanwhile, the formerly thrifty are tossing their money into the sea, the formerly honest are looting the few small stores on the island, and the formerly friendly are beating their best friends with sticks. And then there are the passionate lovers, spilling out of their shuddering houses to make love in the flood waters, their tangled bodies flowing out to sea, the waves crushing them closer together, their lungs filling with seawater, but their lovemaking enduring to the last beats of their waterlogged hearts.

In the recent drought, the Ailats felt trapped. After a while, the constant sun felt

like a jailer, the gentle breeze like a short chain. They were prisoners of stale weather.

The democratic assembly met in the crumbling dining room of the old hotel. Debates ensued. Some suggested that they call in the U.S. Weather Service to seed some clouds. Others wondered aloud if storm-time could be simulated with giant fans and automatic sprinklers. A few militant members proposed an invasion of a neighboring island known for attracting furious storms. Initially, the debaters spoke without much conviction. Like prisoners confined too long without stimulation, they found thinking, believing, and acting difficult and pointless.

Slowly, however, and without their notice, the tensions and energies escalated. Opposing sides diverged radically, irreparable rifts formed in coalitions, tempers flared, speakers pounded their podiums as the sweat rolled off their foreheads and across their cheeks, a fistfight sparked a melee. Some tried to quell the violence, pleading for simple acts of politeness and decency, reaching out to shake the hands that had just struck them, hugging those whose venomous words were meant to harm, patting the backs of those who choked on their own anger. As the melee spread, the pacifists redoubled their efforts such that their aggressive hugs were indistinguishable from the wrestling of the fighters. Tables and chairs were splintered both in anger and admiration.

At last someone paused long enough to glance out the row of oversized windows. “It’s storm-time!” came the shout, and all heads turned to the dark, ragged clouds, the driving rain, the demonic breakers, the waterspouts drilling the roiling sea. Then the assembly poured out into the tropical storm, joined up with the rest of the half-crazy islanders, and the melee continued its reckless tumult.

The Ailats looked rapturous in their abandon, like captives just released or lovers

reunited, even when they bashed each other's heads or kicked senselessly and angrily at the breaking waves that swept them away. They didn't care; the storm had made them whole again.

Wind

The Roosh's aerodynamic physical features show the effects of hundreds of generations in a windy environment. They are short and thin, with strong legs to keep them upright in gusts. Their noses are narrow with bulbous tips to deflect the wind before it reaches their eyes, which are deep-set and dark, pockets of calm in the turbulence. Their cheekbones are high and their jaws angular, their faces delicate chevrons. The men shave their heads, and on warm days enjoy the pleasure of the wind across their naked scalps. The women grow their hair long and keep it tied in back, out of their faces, except in lighter winds, when they let their hair fly and marvel at the lift it generates, the way it would surely pull them off their horses in a strong gale and raise them into the startling and infinite blue above the plains.

On the Roosh's gently rolling landscape, the winds on an average day would be enough to knock down trees, which explains why there aren't any. An outsider would have to shield his eyes and turn his face from this wind, and gusts would blow him into the needlegrass. But the Roosh remain firmly planted, with a gentle, almost imperceptible lean into the wind, as though they have a mechanism in their bodies that anticipates the gusts and prepares unconsciously. On days when the winds gust and shift erratically, the

Roosh's leaning becomes a graceful dance, an entire camp leaning one way and the other.

Despite appearances, the Roosh are constantly aware of the wind. They have no written language, and so the motion of the air is their only means to communicate.

Without the wind they'd wander aimlessly on the endless and barren plains, never sure where to find game or edible roots, never sure when to camp or move on. Worse, without the wind, their entire tribe would dissolve into an isolationist band of melancholy navel-gazers.

To them, the wind is a necessary third-party in their communications, a go-between or runner. This fact alone makes them seem isolated, even from each other: the Roosh don't speak directly to each other; they speak to the wind, and the wind carries their words for them. Generally, the Roosh aren't troubled by this. They know that if they show the proper respect for the wind, it will carry their messages faithfully.

Showing the proper respect means that the Roosh are always alert to the wind's subtleties—its direction, its shifts, the strengths of its bursts and softer undertones, the temperature of its notes. It means, too, that the Roosh are forbidden to make any gesture that defies the wind—to speak, spit, or flatulate into the wind is a terrible blasphemy.

But it's true that the Roosh have uncertainties that other peoples don't think of. Say a Roosh mother speaks to the wind, the wind carries her message to her son, but the son doesn't behave as she expects. Suddenly her faith in the wind is shaken ever so slightly, and she can't help but wonder if the wind has played a trick and changed her words before they reached her son. Or if a lover's pleas get no response from his beloved, he wonders if his messages are even reaching her ears. He curses the wind, grows melancholy and withdrawn, and concludes we are all prisoners of our own skin, at the

mercy of fickle winds, ultimately unknown and unknowable to others.

The Roosh are most afraid of the rare days when there is no wind at all and a deadly silence settles on the plains. Talking is pointless, then, and everything that had seemed worthwhile only yesterday now seems static and foolish. Leaders are unable to make decisions, hunters don't know where to find food, and most people stay in their tents, searching their memories for behavior that might have offended the winds. They make all kinds of pledges to improve themselves in thought and deed, deeply agitated until the winds pick up again. When the winds finally return, the whole village celebrates in what's known as a *rabash*, or talk-circle.

The talk circles follow from the Roosh custom that in any conversation, the speaker must be upwind and the listener downwind. Thus, when two Roosh converse, they circle around each other, chins raised in solemn respect for the wind, speaking and listening, speaking and listening, each according to his position in the talk-circle. They often hold hands as they speak, and fast talkers look like a pair of children swinging each other around, leaning back against the sky, defying gravity with their words.

For ceremonies and celebrations, the Roosh form a huge talk circle out of the entire community. Sometimes the person at the head of the circle (facing downwind, the honored position) will begin with the opening line of a story. The circle then moves, slowly at first, counterclockwise, with each person in turn adding a line to the story. Sometimes the stories recount the history of the tribe. At other times, the stories are inventions purely for entertainment, and these often become contests of cleverness and originality in which the story swerves in surprising directions that challenge the next speaker to think quick. The rotation speed is increased with each revolution, and then the

circle becomes a game of quickness. If a speaker stumbles over the next line, he is removed from the circle to the laughter and comic jeers of the others. The circle then accelerates as it tightens, but also jerks to a halt more frequently as fumlbers get ousted. The last few rounds are spectacular displays of mental and physical agility, with participants swinging each other in a blur and jabbering like auctioneers. The last two participants grab each other's wrists and kick up a cloud of dust that blows into the ecstatic crowd. Their words come in staccato gusts until one falters and they stop, the crowd still cheering, and hug each other while their dizziness subsides.

The Roosh have hundreds of names for the winds that blow on the plains, each of which has special significance, both individually and in combination with other winds. The *mahoon* is a wind that blows from the west, steady and strong for at least a minute at a time, and wrapping itself around things, so that the Roosh feel it on both sides of their bodies at once. Such a wind is calming and makes the Roosh believe the day will go well. A *sapooth* is a wind from any direction that seems to press down from the sky, adding weight and making travel slower. It brings messages from the sky, usually forewarnings of a difficult winter or an approaching calm. The Roosh are fondest of the *cloopit*, usually out of the north-northwest, which comes in big, laughing bursts followed by teasing moments of silence. A day of *cloopit* usually inspires a communal talk-circle.

When the Roosh die, their bodies are burnt in a fire pit and their ashes scattered to the winds. The winds of the dead are never spoken of by name. They swirl aloft, carrying the ashes of hundreds of generations, all spinning in an endless talk circle for those among the living who will lift their chins and listen.

Streams of Conscience

The Tanu live in a hilly land with few rivers but many streams, the voices of which can be heard day and night, from hilltop and forest, in the backs of conversations and interjecting themselves into thoughts. The Tanu streams talk incessantly, in fact. And the streams hold no secrets, say the Tanu, because for streams thought and speech are one and the same, with no filter to divide the two, no intermediary to convert one to the other. This explains their purity; the streams live with a clear conscience because they bare their souls every moment of the day. Confession isn't the word for it, since the streams never for one second let a word or deed weigh on their souls. Anyway, since they spend the day speaking their thoughts, they have no time to sin.

Some Tanu wish the streams would shut up. "Talk, talk, talk," they say. "The streams should find something better to do. They should be quiet for just a minute and take in the view." But the Tanu who complain this way often have guilty consciences, and for a Tanu with a guilty conscience, the talk of the streams sounds a lot like an accusation.

Most of the Tanu find the talk of the streams soothing, the cooing voice of mother to child. When they feel bored or despondent, they find a private spot beside one of the many streams and are healed there by the voice of the stream, gurgling, cooing, bubbling

its every thought. They stare into its pure soul, at the fish and the frogs that swim in it, and the words of the stream wash over them and refresh them like a bath. But when they are guilty, they stay away.

The guilty must live with the weight of their guilt, swelling more each day, until they are called before the village water-priest. The priest has the power to turn people into streams. He will call you in when your symptoms are brought to his attention: long, pointed silences, heavy steps with a hanging head, and a fear or loathing of the limpid voice of the streams. Sometimes the priest observes for himself, and sometimes the symptoms are brought to his attention. Sometimes, when a theft or an adultery or some other crime is committed, the priest is told in advance what to look for. The offender may at first cover his symptoms well, but the priest watches patiently. Sooner or later, the offender's head sinks a little lower and his steps grow a little heavier and the few times he speaks his voice falls to the ground, weighted with guilt. Then the priest knows. Still, he waits, and waits more, until the offender's guilt has become so heavy he's willing to submit to the pain and terror of the transformation—anything, as long as the sludge of guilt is scrubbed from his soul. And then the priest sends his messenger.

When you are called before the water-priest, your skin begins to tremble, like a stream, and your words become babble, like a stream's, and drops of water flow from your forehead, each like a tiny stream. But the final transformation takes place only on the priest's command. You enter the priest's hut and kneel before him. For some people, this moment results in a loss of bladder control, another sign of the transformation.

“Priest,” you say, “my soul is clouded with sin and I have concealed it with silence.”

“Your silence has been felt in the village,” says the priest. “It is a heavy rock on all of our shoulders.”

“Forgive me,” you say.

“Your forgiveness will come only from a cleansing,” says the priest, “and a cleansing will come from the stream.”

At that, the priest steps forward and rubs your cheeks. If you didn’t lose bladder control before, you surely will now. For now you know the transformation is taking place. Your limbs become liquid, so that someone must hold you up. Your entire body becomes soaked in your own fluids. And then the burden of silence is released and your words flow endlessly, so that everything once closed within you is released in a flood of words, of secrets and confessions, of brilliant and foolish thoughts, of idle chatter and endless babble, of gossip and blather, chit-chat, prattle, and palaver, tittle-tattle, malarkey, and buncombe. It all comes out, both nonsense and poetry, cleansing your soul. Sometimes the cleansing takes just a few minutes and sometimes days. You talk and talk as the priest listens closely, not so much for the meanings of your words but for the texture of your voice, which is a sign of your soul’s clarity. When the priest is satisfied that your voice is that of the pure streams, babbling nonsensically but also calmly and clearly, he pours a small vial of water over your head.

“Behold,” announces the water-priest to the fascinated observers, “his soul is cleansed, and he who was once heavy is now light. He who was once guilty is now the purest among us.”

And then you collapse and are carried back to your hut ceremonially, by those who consider it an honor to do so. You sleep longer and deeper than you’ve ever slept, and

when you awake it is to a world of lightness and perfection, in which the babble of streams calls to you like the voice of an adoring mother. You run to the nearest stream and bathe naked in its waters, your thoughts so light they are swept away unformed. And for a while, at least, you are part of the stream.

For Love

When an Ioomi man first feels the undeniable stirrings of love for a woman, he checks his pulse, swallows his fears, and confides in his closest friend and confidante.

The confidante follows his friend around for a week or two, observing the reactions of the man to his intended.

“Is she not beautiful?” the man says to his confidante as they watch the woman bathe beneath one of the many cool and fragrant waterfalls that wash over this remote volcanic island. “Does she not swim with the grace of a fish?” the man says as they watch the woman dive for mollusks in the limpid sea.

The confidante watches carefully, silently remarking the proof that his friend is in love: the glassy eyes, the breathless words, the trembling hands.

He is also watching the girl, for he knows that in the next life it will be he who must love her. That is the cycle of love and death in the Ioomi world.

When the confidante has gathered his evidence, he pays a visit to the *ooli*, a kind of love doctor.

“My friend is lovesick,” he tells the *ooli*.

“Are your friend’s eyes glassy, like the evening sea that pines for the moon?” asks

the *ooli*.

“His eyes are glassy and he pines for a woman,” answers the confidante.

“Are his words breathless, like the branches of palms that pine for the wind?”

“His words are breathless and he pines for a woman,” answers the confidante.

“Do his hands tremble, like the earth that pines for Mahooi,” asks the *ooli*,

referring to the god of the volcano.

“His hands tremble and he pines for a woman.”

“Then you have correctly diagnosed your friend’s illness. Well done,” says the *ooli*. “Now it is time for the cure. Do what is required, and may you be shown the same kindness in your next life.”

The confidante has known all along it would come to this. Now it is he who must check his pulse and swallow his fears.

“I know the cure for your bursting heart,” he says to his friend, who then embraces him and responds knowingly, “You are the one I can count on. I will one day repay you in kind,” *one day* understood by both to mean *in the next life*, when their roles will be reversed.

And then the confidante retreats to his hut for a period of contemplation, in which he must determine the best method to sacrifice himself for his friend’s love and secure for his friend the wife he so desires.

In the old days, a confidante’s role was much easier: he simply threw himself into the hot lava pools that bubble at the mouth of the volcano. Some say that the method changed when an eruption by Mahooi was attributed to an overflow of love sacrifices. Even Mahooi can only accept so much love, they say. Others say the change came simply

out of boredom, that the confidantes demanded greater creative freedom.

Now, each new generation of confidantes seems to want to outdo their predecessors. Generations ago, a popular method was to dive head first from a tall coconut tree. Not long ago, confidantes found ingenious uses for fire, burning themselves on a stake, tripping face first into a bed of hot coals, or rowing out to sea in a burning canoe. The current rage is to swim with bleeding fish tied to your waist, inviting the sharks to eat you.

Once the confidantes were given their creative freedom, people naturally began to judge them on style. The more frightening, original, and painful the death, the greater the declaration of love, and thus the greater attraction a woman feels for her fiancé.

The confidante considers his options for the marriage proposal, weighing tradition against originality, and at last he reaches his decision.

Some days later, a group of young friends, male and female, are gathered around a typical beachside fire, tasting sweet fruits while a mako shark crackles over the flames. The lover eyes his beloved, palms sweating. He doesn't know when his love will be announced, but he knows it will be soon; the girl, on the other hand, may have no idea that the boy is even interested.

Suddenly, the group hears a stirring in the top of a palm, and in the next instant, the confidante appears against the blue sky in a swan dive so graceful that those watching cannot believe the earth would dare stand in his way. But it does, and his neck is broken, though not until he has crashed through the roasting shark and sent a plume of cinders and sharkmeat over everyone.

When the ashes settle and the young people stand up, the identities of the newly

engaged couple are finally revealed by the names the confidante had carefully tattooed to his feet, one on each: Pua and Pulani.

Pua takes Pulani's hand. They are pleased with the spectacular combination of the tree-fall and the fire-leap, both of which pay homage to tradition, while the shark, of course, alluded to the new style of the current generation. The couple feel a humbling but cozy sense of their place in history but also the freshness of the new. It is love that connects them to both.

Pulani accepts, of course.

In theory a woman may reject the dramatic and bloody marriage proposal, but Ioomi beliefs are such that it would be a great sin against nature. The Ioomis say that the marriage is destiny, that in this life the woman must marry the man who chooses her, just as in the next she will marry his confidante. And the cycle continues.

The women, like the men, are divided into two groups, though unlike the men their roles remain the same from lifetime to lifetime. A woman may either be a *lali*, the first wife and the object of her husband's lifelong devotion, or a *lulani*, a second wife and companion.

Generation after generation, the *lali* is coddled and adored by her husband, beginning with the love-sacrifice that proclaims publicly his love for her and serves as a marriage proposal. Once married, the *lali* performs no household duties and is showered constantly with gifts and affection. Her husband must provide her with whatever she desires.

A husband naturally grows weary of serving his first wife by himself, so he soon seeks a *lulani*, a second wife, to assist him with household duties and to bear children.

Thereafter, a husband sleeps only with his second wife, who becomes a partner to him, though never an object of devotion.

By all accounts, a husband's relationship with his second wife is far closer and seemingly more satisfying than his relationship with his *lali*, who remains an eternal flame that burns symbolically but generates little heat. And yet a husband will speak in wistful, glowing terms of his *lali* even as he stands holding the hand of his life partner, his *lulani*.

The life of a *lali* is perhaps the strangest of all. She lives like a queen in her own house, every whim satisfied by her fawning husband, yet she is denied the satisfaction of a loving partnership like that which exists between a husband and his second wife. Neither may she have sex with her husband. Ioomi taboos strictly forbid a husband from having sex with his *lali*; to consummate the relationship, they say, would surely despoil their love. Yet rarely does a *lali* remain a virgin, because there is no law preventing her from sleeping with any other man. Such behavior is usually frowned upon, but no man would dare get angry at his *lali*, even if he caught her in the act. Many *lali*, in fact, relish this wrinkle in the social fabric, satisfying themselves with a great many men in an Ioomi village, at all hours of the day, in every possible setting, and using every position known to the Ioomis.

Pua and Pulani marry just three days later, while the oiled, well-preserved body of Pua's confidante receives the seat of honor, front and center.

As the ceremony concludes and the interested parties wander back to their huts, a *lali* reaches out of the bushes and grabs the first handsome man she sees.

"A man may kill himself for love but a woman may not," she says. "I must do *something* for love."

And then she takes his hand and pulls him into the bushes with her, laughing with

delight, while behind them, just offshore, a man thrashes about and screams as he is slowly disemboweled by frenzied sharks.

The priestess places the anthropologist's palm over her bellybutton.

The anthropologist splays his fingers and presses them into the priestess's soft skin one at a time.

The priestess brings one knee up and puts her hand on the anthropologist's wrist.

The anthropologist moves his face closer to the priestess' neck and inhales deeply. Then he exhales so his breath brushes her skin.

The priestess smooths the top of the anthropologist's foot with her big toe. She looks at him as if she has something to say, even though she doesn't.

The anthropologist allows the shape of her hip to mold his palm.

The priestess allows her lips to open slightly.

Their movements create a new swaying pattern in the hammock, while the flashlight beam makes an elliptical pattern on the wall, an orbit disordered by unexpected gravity.

She stops caressing his lower back and abruptly pulls away. "You only want to sleep with me because you know you are going to die," she says.

"That's not true!" he protests.

"It's my fault," she says. "I never should have told you first."

"No no, really it's good that you told me. I would have been mad if you hadn't."

“No you wouldn’t have. You would have been dead either way. But now I’ll always wonder.”

“I’d fall for you anyway. I’d fall for you even if I were going to live forever.”

“Do you promise?”

“Promise not to kill me and then you’ll see.”

“So that’s it!” She folds her arms over her bare breasts. “You only want to sleep with me to save your life!”

She turns to face the wall, and he follows, wrapping his arm around her. Now he’s in the uncomfortable position of having to convince her that sleeping with her is more important to him than his life. It’s really a game, a lover’s game, since they both know his life has lost all meaning outside the moment. He has only now, and the continual forking toward now’s end.

“When I was a boy, I dreamed of traveling the world,” he says. “Then I did it, several times over. Now I wonder, even if you released me, where would I go?”

She puts her hand on his arm. “When I was a girl, I dreamed of someone telling me stories.”

“That was me,” he says.

“The story I remember was full of light,” she says. “The words were light. I could see that the words were light and that the light was all around me but none of it was directly on me. The light shined everywhere but on me. When I moved, the light moved, too. Once, I hid behind a tree and then popped my head out, trying to trick the light into shining on me. I finally gave up, telling myself that the light was everything but me, the light was the world except for me. Was that the story you told me in my dream?”

“No,” says the anthropologist. “The story I told was about a whole world of darkness that had just one small piece missing. The missing piece was felt but not seen, a hole that all the world’s light seemed to drain into. If the world could find its missing piece, it would then be complete and bathed completely in light. Meanwhile, the world moved around its missing piece, slowly defining its location but still unable to see it, until the missing piece became the most important part of the world.”

“Oh,” says the priestess. “I must have dreamed of another storyteller then. Sorry.”

The anthropologist traces her areola with his finger, then crosses gently over her nipple, as if to cross it out and remind himself not to go further. He does anyway. He lets his finger mimic a water droplet as it runs down her breast, then down her stomach, where it pools in the soft hollow between her hips.

The priestess turns back to him. She allows her fingers to roll down his arm and across his lower back in tiny rivulets.

“You see?” she says. “This is a kind of note-taking, too. Only better.”

The rain taps at the thatched roof and drips off into the mud. Notes are being taken. One day, thinks the anthropologist, the rain will stop and the world will tell its story once and for all. Meanwhile, there is only the desire for it.

He glides his fingertips over the priestess’s damp inner thighs and down beyond the flashlight beam.

He hears only her breath now, her sighs and small gasps. This begins to unnerve him, because it makes it seem their conversation has ended for good and the sequence has begun that will lead inevitably to his death. He wants to touch her somewhere that

will make her talk, dirty or otherwise. As his hands travel over her body, seeking the magic spot, her breath only quickens, and words seems further and further from her mind.

It occurs to him that he has roamed the world as he now does her body, searching for the world's g-spot, if by "g" it's meant "gab" or "garrulous." He's had no better luck with the world than he's having now with the princess. The problem is that the throes of desire make talking impossible, or unnecessary, or insignificant. Or maybe we just forget.

It's a problem with the construction of the world, he decides, and he wishes he believed in someone or something to blame for this.

He can't stop it from happening any longer. He's gone too far. He's been pushing up against an invisible barrier, and now the barrier will either break or spring him backward into oblivion. He wants it to break. He can't think of a reason it shouldn't. He can barely think at all anymore. He wonders at how a world that once seemed so full of possibilities has narrowed itself to just two. But mostly, he feels the surge of desire that he will gladly let carry him to his death. He understands that this is how you die; you fight it, you accept its inevitability, and then you finally crave it so much you leap into it. There is nothing now he would rather do.

Fishing for Lost Souls

The Kamaks live on a permafrosted island, barren and colorless, where it's easy to believe you are alone on the planet but not in the universe. Even the Kamaks wonder how they ended up there. Someone, they think, lost his way.

Then, nights when they gaze into the clear, cold, star-crowded sky, they're reminded of just how lost they are, and their sadness ripens into the profound ache of those who have lost even themselves.

Long ago, when the earth was newly formed, the Kamaks lived far to the south, where the air was warmer and heavier and the land softer and greener. Then, they say, something happened that made the Kamaks and the land suddenly incompatible; either the land grew hostile toward the Kamaks' carefree and irresponsible living or the Kamaks ceased to appreciate the land for its beauty and abundance. Whatever the reason, the warmth began to burn, the air stuck in their throats, and the bright colors seared their eyes. The Kamaks knew they had to leave.

The Kamaks' souls had other ideas. "Not so fast," they said. "We like it here."

"But our stomachs reject the food and our skin angers in the heat," said the Kamaks.

“We don’t care,” said their souls. “The heat pleases us, and the food means nothing to us—we’re souls, after all, not bodies.”

The Kamaks don’t know why their souls became so belligerent. It may be that the souls had begun meeting at night, while the Kamaks were asleep. And they talked. They developed their own ways. They decided that what they liked and disliked did not always agree with the likes and dislikes of Kamaks’ bodies, which felt more and more like prisons to them. They developed their own music and dance and held their own spirited celebrations and never invited their Kamak bodies, who slept stupidly through the orgies of their own souls.

The Kamaks were scandalized by their souls’ rebellion. They had always believed there were times—when they made love, said the romantics—that their souls spoke to each other. But they could never have imagined their souls would sneak from their bodies and throw parties at night.

The Kamaks had to decide whether to stay with their errant souls or leave for cooler lands and thereafter go it alone. They pleaded with their souls.

“You can’t stay here! You belong to us!”

“What nonsense! It’s you who belong to us! We know we can live without you, but the question you must ask is whether *you* can live without *us*.”

In the end, the Kamaks took the risk. They’d grown sick of the heat, the heavy air, the overly rich food. The land was so green it hurt!

So they left, some of them weeping, and sought a new home. They came to an ocean and sailed in boats. The Kamaks are only fair sailors, though, and they don’t have a keen sense of direction, so they drifted endlessly, surviving on fish and rainwater, until

finally they awoke one morning to find their boats locked in by ice. They stepped out and hiked to the nearest rise.

“This is our new home,” declared their leader, his open hand trembling, his voice quaking in the cold. The Kamaks looked at each other in frightened silence. Someone coughed.

They adapted, learning to fish through the ice in winter months, when only the moon provided solace from the darkness, and to hunt reindeer and stay away from bears in the summer months that were warmer and lighter and reminded them of their former home, which some now wished they'd never left. They found they could survive without their souls after all, but they also felt a growing ache that made them anxious and moody.

The Kamaks say they should have known what would happen next.

One day, in the dead of winter, they awoke in darkness and stepped outside their ice-huts to find the sky littered with tiny lights.

“Our souls!” they cried. “Our souls have come looking for us!”

At first, the Kamaks now believe, their souls were probably thrilled to finally be free of their fleshy wardens. Then, too late, they discovered the loneliness of disembodied souls, the airy sadness of ghosts who moan and shuffle through the eternal night. The souls longed for their bodies, just as their bodies longed for their souls. And so, in their sadness, the souls went looking for their bodies. But Kamaks' souls, like the Kamaks', have a poor sense of direction. Souls can only move upward and drift, and from so great a height, the souls could not hope to see or hear their living bodies calling to them.

“We're here! We miss you too! Please return to us and we'll let you out at night!”

The souls did not answer back, and the dark winter skies were cold and silent as always.

The more unhappy Kamaks had long thought of setting out in boats for their lost home to the south, but now they knew that would be useless. Their souls had gone wandering, and the Kamaks would never feel at peace until they brought their lost souls home.

It used to be that the source and final destination of all Kamak souls was the Great One, but now when a Kamak dies, his soul doesn't know it. And while a soul is released from the Great One when a Kamak is born, it never makes it into a Kamak body. Instead, it gravitates naturally toward the other souls. And so each Kamak child is born without its soul, destined to experience the same ache and emptiness as its parents.

Imagine the longing a Kamak feels when he looks into dark skies and knows that somewhere in the galaxy of lights his disembodied soul drifts on an impossible search. Imagine the long winter months when the souls drift above the Kamaks day and night, leaving the Kamaks in a sad trance. They know they'd be better off with their eyes to the ground, but even there the ice glimmers with the souls' dim reflection. Imagine the long summer months when the sun does not set, their souls don't appear, and the Kamaks' relief turns slowly to longing and then to concern that their souls have given up the search.

But the Kamaks are not without hope. In winter months, and in those months between seasons when the stars come only at night, the Kamaks perform a simple, moving ritual that translates as "fishing for souls." When the sea is navigable, they set out in boats, and when the sea is iced, they walk far out onto the smooth, desolate ice shelf. They carry torches, the flames casting orange pools on the surface of the sea or the ice.

When their leader determines they have reached the right place, one far enough from land that there is nothing to obstruct the firelight, he holds up his trembling hand and announces with a quaking voice, "Our souls may see us here."

Then the Kamaks light the long arrows they've brought with them and slide them onto their bows. The leader says a prayer:

Dear lost souls, we send you this light and heat

to help you find your way.

Lost souls! We miss you!

Please return to us and we'll give you

the light and heat you desire,

even in the darkest months of winter.

Lost souls, we'll let you out at night

to practice your own customs

and enjoy your celebrations.

We'll make love in the day

so you may speak to each other

through our eyes and fingertips.

Dear lost souls, follow these flames back to earth

for our longing hearts to greet you.

And then the Kamaks shoot their flaming arrows into the clear night like flickering beacons, while the ice glows a pale orange with streaks of reflected firelight.

Only the arrows return to earth, but Kamaks are certain that a day will come when the lost souls will follow, falling from the sky like luminous rain and finally making the

Kamaks feel home again.

The Two Sighs of God

In the beginning was a God with no voice. Why, after all, would God need a voice when She is alone in the universe? It took perhaps billions of years, say the Aap, but even God grew weary of occupying the universe by Herself. She sat on a rock one day and sighed, the first noise She had ever made. The noise surprised even Her. And then the noise returned to Her in an echo from the Great Mountains at the far end of the universe and She was pleased.¹

After hearing the echo of Her first sigh, God entertained Herself with Her newfound voice by humming and singing, and before long She found that Her voice was so perfect it brought things into existence. God sang, and the stars formed in the sky. The moon and the sun appeared. The animals sprang from the plants and the birds sprang from the animals. She sang and created the Aap, the one creature who could sing back to Her. And She was pleased.

Now the Aap keep singing, knowing that it is their first purpose on earth. They

¹ Sometimes the echo of this sigh can be heard still, like distant music, when one camps alone in the mountains and the wind is calm and every living thing holds its breath simultaneously.

sing when they are out by themselves, herding their goats or collecting berries. They sing in pairs when they go off to the higher elevations for rarefied romantic interludes. They sing as a village on special religious occasions throughout the year, their voices turned to the sky in prayer.

The Aap also have plenty of musical instruments to accompany their singing or to replace their singing when their voices grow tired. They have at least five different kinds and sizes of drums, three stringed instruments, and eight kinds of flutes. Some of them are made from the bones of long-dead Aap, who would consider it a great honor to continue making music after death. The tooth flute makes its music by whistling through a set of human teeth. The hip drum is formed by stretching an animal hide over two joined human pelvises. You beat the hip drum with a radius and an ulna, the bones of a human forearm.

In each Aap household, there is a voice singing or an instrument playing all day and much of the night. When an Aap reaches adolescence, he or she must leave home and serve three years in another home as a *pala*. It is the *pala*'s duty to create suitable music for all family occasions. Thus, a *pala* develops a repertoire of breakfast, lunch, and dinner music, cooking music, cleaning up music, waking up and going to sleep music, bathing music, etc. A *pala* may accompany an individual family member on a long journey to visit relatives or on a short trip to relieve himself behind a rock.

During the three years of service, the young Aap is also allowed time alone to compose a love song for a future husband or wife. Those with poor singing voices will compose this love song on a musical instrument. Then, at the end of three years, the young Aap is set free to search for a mate. Usually, he already has one picked out, probably one who is herself near the end of her stint as a *pala*. He will go to her house

and begin to sing his love song to her every night, and when she begins to sing her own love song in return, he knows that she will come to him soon.

There is a legend told about one *pala* with the most beautiful voice ever heard in the village. The family he served was the luckiest in the village, they say, and the husband and wife and two small children lived in constant bliss, bobbing on waves of the *pala*'s gentle voice.

At the end of three years, the *pala*, as desirable as he was, did not marry right away. He had fallen in love with a deaf girl who cared nothing for him or his beautiful voice. Night after night, he sang outside her window, knowing that she could not hear him, but knowing, too, that it was all he had, since by looks alone he was no better than average. Night after night, the village heard him, and they held each other and cried for him. The deaf girl must have known he was there beneath her window, but she didn't grant him even a single look.

Then, one night, the tormented young singer had guard duty in the village, which meant that he had to stay up all night and make sure the Aaps' musical prayers never ceased. For the Aaps, it is the worst blasphemy for the music to ever fall silent, which is why, at any time of night, there are at least two Aaps working in shifts to perpetuate the melody of Aap life.

The young man was paired with an older drummer that night, and they played the early morning shift in the last hours before sunrise. At some point, the drummer was silenced when he was attacked and killed suddenly by a snow leopard. The sweet-voiced singer, tired and in a half-asleep trance from too many sleepless nights, apparently did not notice the silence of the other half of his duo across the village. His voice grew weaker

and weaker, until the final note fell to his chest. There was deathly silence, and no prayers floating up to God's ears.

The village *apoli*, a sort of musical director, was the first to notice the silence that morning before the sun rose. The *apoli* ran out of her house and sang loudly and quickly, as if to make up for the silence, and ran to the post of the drummer, where she found nothing but a few drops of blood. Then she ran to the post of the singer, whom she shook violently awake, all the while singing as loud as she could. The two exchanged horrified looks, and the singer knew instantly what he had done. He stood up and left the village, the *apoli*'s voice following him up into the mountains. He wept as he walked, his sobs the only sound he could hear after a while. He climbed directly to the edge of a tall, east-facing cliff just as the sun was creeping over the horizon. There he clutched his chest and leapt into the abyss, his final sweet-voiced shout resonating in the canyon, surviving him. The village heard it, all except the deaf girl, and they sat up in their beds, clutched their own chests, and cried.

God heard it, too, and that was the only other time in the history of the universe that She sighed.

The Town Fool

The Bhanari people believe that God lives among them in human form. Unfortunately for God, they don't have much respect for Him.

God is kicked, beaten, spanked, punched, spit on, laughed at, and wrestled to the ground, much like an annoying younger brother. There are perks to being God, too: You are served the best food, You sleep in the best hut with whomever You choose, and You have elaborate ceremonies performed in Your honor.

The Bhanari believe their god was once a great god among gods. Then something happened. Either He let the praise of the other gods go to His head and got sloppy, or He went crazy, just as people sometimes do, and no longer could keep the earth in proper operating order.

Most Bhanari believe the latter theory. "Just look around you," they say. "One day the world is calm and bright and the next a terrible storm comes up and threatens to blow us into the sky. One year there is plenty of water for our crops, and the next there is no water at all and many of our people are forced to eat bugs or starve. One day the world seems like a beautiful place, full of joy and song, and the next it seems like a

revolting error that we're even here. Only a crazy god could manage such a world."

The Bhanari think that their god, because of His insanity, was banished from the realm of the gods and forced to live within His own creation. But if the gods thought of this as a remedy, it didn't work. While the other gods are off keeping other worlds running smoothly, and also creating new ones, almost any of which would be a more hospitable place to live in than this one, the Bhanari god is as crazy as ever.

They try to keep their God in a sane mood, which is why they feed Him and bathe Him and do everything in their power to satisfy Him. Nothing works for long.

"Can you imagine creating a place where people get sick and die?" one of God's bathers asked me. "It's as if He is a disturbed child who destroys His toys when He's done playing with them."

They know it's a bad idea in principle to slap God when He misbehaves--that sometimes makes matters worse--but how can they help themselves when He screws things up so badly?

"Last year," one man told me, "my wife had her first child, but it died three days later. Can you imagine a god who would create a new life and then kill it off in three days?"

"What did you do?" I asked him.

"I marched into God's hut and I beat Him until my fists bled. His cooks had to pull me away. I believe it did some good. Last month, my wife had a baby girl and both are happy and healthy."

How do the Bhanari know who is God among them? He is always the craziest, the one who does the most foolish things and gets into the most trouble. The Bhanari god is

just as likely to take a male as a female form, but no matter which gender, the Bhanari god is known to drink too much, to play tricks on people, to behave erratically and indecently in public, and, in general, to disregard all standards of civility and common sense. He's the town fool.

When God dies, it is because He is so foolish that He can't take care of His own body. Of course, with a god, that doesn't matter; He simply possesses another body. Often, He will try to hide in the least suspicious body, knowing that when He is discovered He will be whipped for the confusion He created by His death. In God's previous incarnation, She was a very fat woman Who liked to eat lemur tails and Whose breath was like an evil wind. When that body died three years ago, God successfully hid in the body of a small, thin, and seemingly modest man for two months before He was discovered. He was walking through the village one day, on His way to trade for some fruit to relieve His constipation, when a woman heard Him belch. No one had ever heard this small, modest man belch before, and the woman was startled, until she realized that the man's body had been possessed by God.

"It's Him!" she shouted, and she followed after Him, yelling and pointing Him out, so that very soon the entire village knew His true identity. He denied it, of course, but He always does. After a sound thrashing, He was restored to His luxury hut and given all the cathartic fruit He wanted.

It's not often one has the opportunity to talk face to face with God, and I couldn't pass it up. I asked God's seamstress if I could have a talk with Him, and found access to Him surprisingly easy.

"Try not to upset Him," she said. "But don't let Him misbehave, either."

I was led into the biggest hut in the village. There were two large rooms, one a break room for His attendants and the other for God Himself. I approached Him with slow steps. He was indeed a small man, dwarfed by the huge, throne-like wooden chair He sat in. He had small, mousy eyes and straight dark hair. Two female attendants were rubbing oils onto His pale, bony chest. A third stood at the ready with a drink in one hand. One of His bathers was in the somewhat complicated process of bathing each toe on His left foot. I introduced myself.

“Please pull up a mat,” He said. I did so, and sat at God’s feet, next to His foot-bather.

“You’re a foreigner,” He said. “Does this seem like nonsense to you?”

“I’m not here to judge,” I said. “I’m an observer.”

“It seems like nonsense to me,” He said. “I was completely ignored by everyone else in the village, even My wife, and then some stupid woman claimed she heard Me belch. Now look at Me. I’m a simple man, and I don’t like this kind of attention. I don’t like the beating I take, either. I’ve got bruises all over my back from some woman who came in yesterday, claiming I made her husband cheat on her.”

“You don’t believe you’re God?” I asked.

“I don’t believe in God,” He said.

One of His attendants stopped applying oil and pointed a finger in His face.

“Don’t say foolish things,” she said. “You know where that will get You.”

He ignored her. “I’m not even a Bhanari. I came here from the city looking to get away from the congestion. Now I can’t leave. They’re right that the world is a crazy place,” He said. “But it’s not My fault. I just live here.”

“He may even believe that,” the foot-bather said, turning to me. “He’s that crazy. But that’s no excuse. He’s the cause of the world’s problems, so He has to be taught a lesson when He screws things up.”

“There’s beauty in the world, too,” I said, “so shouldn’t He get some credit for that?”

“What do you call bathing His feet?”

“I sleep with Him,” said one of the women oiling Him. “And He’s not even a good lover. That’s my sacrifice to the world.”

“There are perks,” said God. “But given the choice, I’d much prefer a quiet life. I’d even go back to the city if they’d let Me.”

Just then a man burst into the hut. His eyes were wide with fury, and he stomped up to God.

“You idiot!” he shouted. “I asked You to keep the pests away from my garden and look what You’ve done.” He held up half a yam with insects crawling all over it. Then he began to beat God with it, shouting, “Stupid, stupid imbecile! Can’t You do one thing right?! Idiot!” and so on.

I slipped out, leaving God’s attendants to keep the angry man from injuring God too badly.

The foot-bather came up behind me.

“Of course we know that the world is a beautiful place,” he said. “Every day I walk through the woods and smell the trees and flowers, and I look up at the sky and marvel at the warmth of the sun and the endless varieties of clouds. I pick up a clump of dirt and marvel at the variety of little creatures there. And then I go home to my wife and

children and I kiss each one of them, quietly giving thanks for the warmth and good feeling that exists in the world. But, you see, I can't say these things to God. He might get the wrong idea. He might think that we approve of everything He does, and in our experience, God only responds to negative reinforcement, and to that just barely."

I then walked with the man through the village and the surrounding woods, marveling at all the things he mentioned, basking in the warmth of a perfect day, one that only a god could have created, until my new friend stubbed his toe on a tree root.

"I'll kill that idiot," he said.

A Great Victory

A strong and mysterious ocean current washes east to west around the island of the Shumi people. The current is notorious among sailors, both because its strength can push an unwary captain off course and because of the junk that gets drawn into it, some of which can ram and cause great damage to even a large ship. This “junk” can be both natural and man-made, everything from trees to car parts. Sometimes things that aren’t supposed to float will be drawn to the surface briefly, like whales coming up for air, before they descend to the unknown depths, not to be seen again for many years. It is recorded in the minutes of the IMO’s Maritime Safety Committee that the crew of the freighter *Woosop* claimed to have seen a World War II tank surface beside their ship and turn its turret toward them before sinking again. What’s not recorded is that, following this incident, the crew of the *Woosop* developed a compulsive interest in history, so much so that they earned a reputation for raiding the history sections of libraries in their ports of call. Several of the crew went on to become published and respected university historians.

It’s not known whether that WWII tank ever reached the island of the Shumi, but many other things have, and the Shumi consider each of these a gift from the sun. In

exchange, the Shumi give equivalent gifts to the sun by day's end. The gifts are symbolic of the mutual goodwill between Shumi and sun and also a reminder of the great alliance that helped save the world.

Long ago, it is said, the sun and moon competed for control of the sky. The moon in those days was equally as bright as the sun, and the almost constant daylight was distressing to the Shumi, who found it difficult to sleep. Also, the efforts of the moon and the sun to outshine each other made the temperature uncomfortably hot. The Shumi were an irritable people in those days, and no one knew what to do about it.

Then, one day, the sun sent one of its winged messengers down to the Shumi to request their assistance.

“If something isn't done soon,” said the winged messenger, “both the sun and the moon will burn themselves out. Then the whole world will wither and die in everlasting darkness.”

The Shumi pondered this and were scared.

“Listen,” added the winged messenger, “the sun has no personal resentment towards the moon. The sun only wants what's best for the world.”

“Well, if the sun wants only to save the world, why doesn't it simply shut itself off?” asked the Shumi.

“That is not the way of the sun,” said the winged messenger. “Or the moon, for that matter. Both are fighting for victory, and if either were to give up, the victory of the other would seem empty—and so would the world.”

The Shumi couldn't argue with that. Besides, they knew that the behavior of the sun and moon was beyond their comprehension.

“What is needed is a great victory,” said the winged messenger. “And such a victory depends on your help.”

The Shumi felt no animosity toward the moon--at least no more than they felt toward the sun. In fact they found both the sun and the moon rather irritating because of the heat. Nevertheless, the Shumi decided to ally themselves with the sun.

The great battle waged for months. The sun and moon fought with light and heat, and the Shumi fought with rocks, shells, and coconuts, all of which they threw at the moon from battle stations high in the tallest palms. Eventually the projectiles took their toll on the moon, whose light faded and whose weaknesses were exploited by the sun and its assigns.

Finally, the moon was killed and the great victory attained. The Shumi felt proud when they looked to the sky and saw the moon’s carcass and the battle scars left by the Shumi projectiles, but they were saddened, too, because they had never harbored any ill-will toward the moon, at least no more than they had toward the sun.

So when the winged messenger descended to offer its congratulations, the Shumi had a suggestion.

“We would like to honor the moon’s memory,” they said.

“You took those words from the sun’s mouth,” said the winged messenger.

After some negotiations, the Shumi came to an agreement with the messenger, who then read it back to them: “Each day from now on, the sun will send you gifts, and you will in turn send gifts to the sun. This exchange will remind us of our great victory, and the goodwill generated by the exchange will be our way of honoring the moon, who fought bravely and who never meant any personal harm to either the sun or the Shumi.”

And so the sacred custom began. Each morning, several Shumi are sent out to the rocky eastern shore of the island to collect the gifts the sun has sent them that day. Not anything that washes up is a gift from the sun; the sun is unlikely to send them a coconut, for instance, since the sun knows the Shumi have plenty of those. Same goes for seaweed, palm fronds, and shells. But tires, buoys, splintered hulls, bottles and cans, rope, and drowned dogs are clearly signs of the sun's generosity. The Shumi collect these items, usually one or two each morning, but sometimes as many as seven or eight when the sun feels especially generous, and carry them back to the village, where they are put on display for all to see and appreciate.

The elders then have the rest of the day to come up with a suitable gift. Sometimes their response is as simple as a palm frond or an article of clothing. Other times, they are challenged to find more complicated offerings, as when they once received a crate full of chickens, two of which were still alive. On that day, the elders debated for hours because they felt they must respond with something special. They decided on a gift of three living snakes, a man's infected pinkie finger, and the split ends from a woman's braided ponytail, which they bound together with vines.

Each sunset the gift or gifts are taken ceremoniously to the west end of the island, down a wide sandy beach and far out into the shallow waters, where they are tossed toward the setting sun. Cheers rise from the shore. Gifts have been exchanged; another day has passed.

Unfortunately, the gift exchange is not the only consequence of the great victory. As the Shumi walk in silence back to the village, the ghostly disk of the moon rises up before them. Secretly, many feel a deep sense of guilt. None will say it aloud, but they

suspect that they may have killed off the moon just to save themselves from the annoying heat. In a moment of weakness, they let their irritability get the better of them. Now, their daily tribute to victory and to the moon's bravery feels like an empty gesture—not so different, they suspect, from the emptiness the sun had warned would follow a quick surrender.

But there is one difference. Tonight, as it does every night, the pale moon will haunt their dreams, glowing dully like the staring eye of a drowned dog. There is meaning to it.

The Shumi wonder if this is the meaning the sun had in mind.

The People Who Retreat from Themselves

I was drawn to the mountains by whispers of an empty village, overheard rumors of a small, high plateau ringed by a natural wall of smooth, conical boulders. The huts, it was said, formed another, concentric ring, and their doorways gaped inward at the flickers of a dying flame. Yet it often happens that rumors and whispers dissemble when confronted, running for cover and cloaking themselves in new skin--the secrets of the universe are revealed only at a slant, a dim light that touches the corner of an eye, a vanishing scent that leaves one hanging by threads of desire, the briefest and lightest touch that may not be a touch after all—and so it seemed that the closer I got to the Mabas' village, the less sure I was of its existence. When the whispers lost their shape and the murmurs dissolved into wind, I prepared to move on. Then, at the last moment, an old man with thin, muscular legs and milky hair approached me in the train station and begged me to follow him.

I did so for four days on a treacherous and nerve-shattering journey. At the outskirts of town we hiked briefly through a dense jungle, pulling leeches from under our collars and hacking away vines and snakes as we followed a path that only my guide could

see. When the terrain soared we climbed three days without equipment. At night, we bivouacked on tiny ledges while bitter winds and restless dreams urged us toward the abyss.

Except at the most harrowing moments, my fears were skillfully diverted by my guide, who in that week told me all he knew of the Mabas, unburdening himself, it seemed, of a lifetime of secrecy....

The Mabas once lived in the long valley where the city now sprawls. Centuries ago, as the young city grew toward and then around them, the Mabas were slowly forced from their homes or pressured to change their customs to better fit in. But the Mabas were fiercely independent; they stuck to their ways as though waging a battle, even when the city people made fun of them, of their overly bright and colorful clothing, the child-like sound of their language, the shameless movements of their seductive walk.

So the Mabas began a retreat that continued for many generations and which some say led to their inevitable demise, but which others--those who believe in the indomitable spirit of humankind or perhaps are overly sensitive to the sadness of loss--say allowed the Mabas to live on. Whichever the case, the Mabas were tired of the ridicule and determined to maintain their traditions, so they moved themselves farther and farther up into the mountains. Adapting to the new environment was difficult at first: they were short of breath; they had to develop a taste for new foods; they had to add a warm lining to their showy attire.

Many did not survive those early years. Yet the Mabas were satisfied that they'd saved the important features of their culture from ridicule and eventual loss. High in their hidden villages, in the gray and white setting of the upper climes, they wore the bright

colors as they had before, spoke their beautiful, child-like language, and walked with the pleasing rhythms of sexual foreplay.

They did not forget the ridicule of the city, however, even as the generations passed, and they worried it would happen again. Year after year, they would peer over the side of the plateau and observe how the growing city stretched its hands into the jungle and clawed through the trees. Someday, they knew, those hands would grasp the rocks and pull themselves up the side of the Mabas' mountain, or else dig at its base until the mountain itself collapsed. Either way, the Mabas would one day be back in the midst of the city, this time with no escape up a mountain; they'd be forced to assimilate with the city-dwellers or be ridiculed forever.

When the city finally grew to the base of the mountain, the Maba elders reached a decision: they would send some members of their tribe into the city to spy on the city-dwellers and learn their senseless and unusual customs. The Maba pilgrims would then report back to the village and teach the other Mabas these customs. That way, when the Mabas were once again surrounded by the city, they would know how to fit in and avoid ridicule but in the privacy of their own dwellings would practice their true customs. This time the Maba retreat would take a different form, from public life to private, from open expression to collective whisper. They would create their own ghetto whose invisible barriers would protect, they hoped, as the mountain heights once did.

The Maba pilgrims descended the mountain and quickly immersed themselves in city life. They studied its strange customs so diligently and imitated them so precisely they had to struggle not to laugh at each other in public, at least at first. Then, after four months, they returned to the mountain and found they had trouble relating to their own

people. Many of them could not bring themselves to return to the old ways, and one went so far as to ridicule his old clothes as garish, and then blush with shame when a beautiful Maba woman walked past seductively. An elder cuffed him: “This is your village! Don’t forget!” The others looked on in shock and fascination.

The pilgrims did return to their old ways, but only in public. Secretly, they continued the ways of the city dwellers, and because many Mabas were fascinated by the city customs, they approached the pilgrims in private. “Teach me the new ways,” they whispered. “Teach me to walk like I’m smashing ants.”

So it happened that the elders’ plan turned against them. Soon, many of the Mabas were outwardly practicing the old customs but behaving like city dwellers in the privacy of their huts or out on the mountain paths in small groups, where they changed into homemade replicas of city clothes, walked the graceless, mechanical city walk, and talked what little they knew of the city talk, chattering endlessly the same few city phrases and laughing overly loud, in city fashion. A secret movement had hollowed out Maba society, leaving an increasingly ironic shell of meaningless rituals and customs.

When this became known to the elders, they saw that the dirty hand of the city had already reached up the mountain and seized their village around the neck, and that it had been by their own invitation.

A choice had to be made, then, either to save the village they’d grown to love or to save the customs that defined them as a people. For the elders, the decision was simple: their people must abandon the village. “Go down to the city and live among the city dwellers, as many of you have long wished,” they said. “There, you will learn the customs of the city and behave in every way so as to blend in with the city dwellers. If

you find you prefer those customs, then you are to ignore the customs of your own people and renounce them forever, as you are no longer a Maba. If you find that you yearn for your old customs then you are to practice those customs by yourself or with other Mabas in the privacy of your dwelling. Under no circumstances may you expose the Maba customs to public ridicule.”

The elders hoped that once the thrill of secrecy was removed from the city customs, most Mabas would return to the old ways, and the ones who didn't would no longer threaten to expose the rest of the village to the city ways. Only by joining the enemy could they one day hope to retreat safely to the old village, having purged themselves of spies and traitors, leaving the faithful few.

So it was that the Mabas retreated from their village--and from themselves, it seemed to some--and headed down the mountain in small groups, so as not to attract notice. Once in the city, they did as the elders had told them, and even the elders did their best to blend in with the city dwellers, though they struggled inwardly with humiliation and despair.

They left their village as it stood, hoping one day to return there for good and meanwhile setting aside one week each year when they would return temporarily and practice their old customs in the open. At the end of the first year, the majority of the Mabas did return and enjoyed the festival, the renewal of friendships and ancient cultural bonds. But with each succeeding year, fewer and fewer Mabas returned to the village. To many, the festival seemed less and less a celebration and more and more a relic, the bright old clothes now costumes, the musical language a child's song they were too old to sing, and the seductive walk a shameful habit they'd worked hard to overcome.

The elders finally sensed this, too, and with trembling voices ordered that the festival no longer be held, since the Mabas had now begun to ridicule their own culture, succeeding far more effectively than the city dwellers could at dissolving the meaning of the most time-honored Maba traditions. The elders understood that Maba culture, if it survived at all, would never resemble what it had.

For a while, the old village was used as a meeting place for far-flung Mabas seeking a mate, but the arduous climb proved too much, and soon the village was all but forgotten, the retreat seemingly final.

“Today,” said my guide, “there are no Mabas that practice the old customs. Not one, not even in private. But the Maba ways survive in uncertain and handed-down memories, images that bear just the slightest resemblance to the truth, and there are Mabas who pass on those images, describing them as best they can but never very well, often speaking only on their deathbeds to children and grandchildren. The Mabas live on, even if each generation knows a little bit less, their memories less and less sure until they are little more than feelings. These memories are all that is left of the Maba customs, and the memories retreat as the Mabas have always done. And the Mabas do not visit the old village because none of them knows the way there. It is an idea to them, a distant home they can reach only through the vaguest recollections. That, I think, is for the best, because I have thought much about the Mabas and see now that it was never the bright clothes that defined them, never the child-like language or the sexy walk--all these things have only provided the Mabas with something to retreat from. That is what Mabas do: they are people who retreat from themselves.”

At last we pulled ourselves over the boulders and jumped down into the Maba

village. I'd expected a ring of crumbling huts, maybe only foundations. Instead, the huts were as sturdy as if they'd just been built, and a small flame still flickered in the central firepit. There was even a little garden with vegetables almost ripe. Inside the huts, there were bowls and cups and cooking utensils laid out neatly, and sleeping mats rolled up in the corners. The effect was eerie, as though some yet unknown disaster had just occurred, or was about to.

When I circled back to the center of the village, I found my guide building a fire.

"You are a Maba," I said, understanding finally.

He looked at me without expression. "I've kept this village all my life, knowing the Mabas would not return, but also knowing that they often think of their village and draw meaning from its memory, even if the memory is vague and pales with each generation. The memory must resemble the village; if the village crumbles so does the memory, and the memory is what makes us Maba. So I once thought. Now I know I was wrong."

And then he asked me to start down the mountain ahead of him so that he could circle the village a final time.

I descended a short way down the path, imagining the solemn actions of my guide--tending the garden one last time, blowing dust off the bowls, repairing the huts, feeding the fire--and believing that he had given me the greatest honor, he had shown me his village so that I would care for it as he once had. But when I paused to look back, I saw that I'd been fully mistaken. Pillars of flames began to rise above the conical rocks and up over the high peak of the Mabas' mountain; the village slowly dissolved into smoke, and the smoke dissipated into the wind.

I waited for my guide, watching the gray smoke thin and fade, until I at last understood that he had retreated, too.

My first thought was that my guide had ensured the survival of Maba culture; without any physical evidence of its existence, it could now be certain of a safe and steady retreat.

But then, if he wanted the Mabas to retreat forever, why did he tell me their story, knowing I would write it down?

Because now the Mabas have retreated beyond the reach of clawing hands and prejudice. Now they exist only on paper, and the paper is a shield that hides their final retreat.

Actors

You know there is something unusual about the Pamoot people as soon as you approach their village, which sits on a green peninsula of land surrounded on three sides by desert. Groups of men and women come running out to meet you on the path. You are hesitant and afraid, even though their faces are beaming with smiles. The Pamoot clap you on the back and rub your shoulders, saying, “We’re so glad you’ve returned, my friend. We thought you’d forgotten your old friends.”

“You must be mistaking me for someone else,” you say.

“You old jokester,” says one man. “Come eat with us. Your wife will leap for joy when she sees you. She is as beautiful as ever.”

When you enter the village, there is indeed a beautiful woman there who claims to be your wife. She puts her arms around your neck and looks deeply into your eyes. “I have missed you,” she says, and kisses you softly on the lips.

You have a difficult decision to make then. Do you try to correct them at the risk of alienating yourself from the tribe? And to anger people with such nervous energy might be dangerous. Rather than rebuff the entire tribe, you play along. Which, you learn later, is exactly what the Pamoot expect.

Though slightly nervous, the Pamoot seem like happy people, by appearances, anyway. Most of them have big smiles on their faces and laugh easily. But sometimes their smiles seem like stage smiles and their laughs like stage laughs--a little too big to be believable, a little too much for real life.

You play your part and become husband to a beautiful Pamoot woman who treats you in every way as though you had left some years ago on a long journey and promised to return. She calls you Bahno, and at night she draws her long, delicate fingers across your cheek and whispers in your ear, "Bahno, I missed you so. Tell me how much you still love me."

And you have no choice but to respond, "I love you as much as always, Alani. I've never loved you more."

In conversations with other Pamoot you begin to grasp the willfulness of their convictions. One day, you go walking with one of several men who claim to be the village chief.

"We're glad you've returned, son," he tells you, putting his arm around your shoulders as a father does to his son. Then you stop at the edge of the desert and gaze out at the endless expanse of sand broken only by small clumps of scrub. "As I stand here with you, I recall with joy the moments of your youth, when these waters teemed with fish and you and I fished together in the boat of my grandfather."

You stare at the sand, trying to understand him. "I remember," you say.

"For old times' sake," he says, "let's you and I sail to the island of the Pamat and check in on our distant relatives there."

As your "father" readies the "boat" for the next day's journey, you see a woman in

the village with her arms cradled as though holding a baby. She lowers her head and coos, rocking her arms and smiling.

“What are you holding?” you ask her.

“Bahno!” she says. “Did no one tell you I had a child while you were gone?”

You shake your head.

“Would you like to hold her?” She stretches her arms out toward you, and you’re forced to oblige. You pull the invisible baby to your chest.

“Mm. Heavy,” you say.

“She’s growing quickly,” she says. “She’ll be big and strong like her father.”

“May I ask the father’s name?” you say.

She looks at you quizzically. “Bahno,” she says, shaking her head and smiling. “I thought you’d recognize the face of your own child.”

You nearly drop it.

“Oh! Be careful with her!” The woman pulls your invisible daughter from you and holds it to her shoulder. “You’ve upset her, Bahno. You should be more gentle!” Then she walks away, leaving you agitated and speechless and feeling strangely guilty for having cheated on Alani. Though you tell yourself that none of it’s true, you’re beginning to have doubts.

The next morning, the man who claims to be your father comes to get you in your hut. You walk with him to the edge of the desert.

“Hop in, Bahno,” he says.

There is nothing to hop into, but by this time you’ve figured out the game, so you step into an imaginary boat and sit down in the sand.

He laughs at you. “We’ll never get anywhere in that position,” he says. He steps in beside you and helps you to your feet. You then begin walking out into the desert.

“Brings back good memories, eh?” says your “father.”

You walk for two hours and begin to think this man is leading you into certain death. Your throat is burning with thirst and your skin feels like it will melt off your bones. Finally, you come to a village in a little oasis.

“The island of the Pamat,” says your “father,” pointing.

The village is the most depressing sight of your journey. The people there are gaunt and starving. Listless children hobble around with bellies swollen from hunger. Many of the adults are all bones and sunken eyes. Yet most of them still manage to smile, almost as broadly as the Pamoot.

One man approaches you as you enter the village. He is older, nearly bald, gray skin hanging from his bones.

“Balah!” he says and hugs your “father.”

Balah turns to you and says, “You remember your Uncle Gee, Bahno?”

“Of course,” you say, smiling. You’ve grown more comfortable with this game of pretend. Too comfortable. But you don’t hug him for fear his bones might crumble.

After a few minutes of friendly conversation, your “father” announces he is going to seek out other relatives.

“We’ll join you shortly,” says Gee. “Bahno and I have a little catching up to do.”

When you are alone with him, your “uncle” says quietly, “It’s sad the way they delude themselves.”

You’re startled. Here at last is someone who can fill you in. “You understand

what's going on?" you ask.

"Of course," he says. "You must be one of those scientists who come out here occasionally to study the strange customs of the Pamoot. As usual, the Pamoot pretend you are someone else. This man, who mistakenly believes he is my brother, also mistakenly believes you are his son. But I know from my own visits to the Pamoot village that this man's real son disappeared years ago. He's been waiting for a stranger. And I suppose you've been claimed as a husband by his daughter-in-law, too."

You nod. It's all coming together now.

"It's tragic, really," says Gee. "The woman, like all the Pamoot, believes she can make something real just by saying it's true. They live a fantasy life. But you must admit they're good actors."

"Excellent actors," you say. "They've led me to play along, and I've even caught myself believing it's all true!"

"Careful," says Gee. "Don't be drawn in too deeply. You might forget yourself and never return home."

You visit with other Pamat, supposed relations of yours. Everyone is friendly, and no one seems bothered by the starvation and poor health of the tribe. You try to return smiles, but your heart aches too much at their wretched condition. You feel helpless, and you wonder if you'll ever be the same when you do return home, wherever that might be.

"We should return before dark," Balah says finally.

"Oh, but you must stay for the feast," says Gee. "We have a pig roasting right now. It will be a great celebration in your honor."

"We really can't," says Balah. "You know how unpredictable the sea is. We

should return while it's calm."

Your Pamat relatives reluctantly say their goodbyes. As you walk through the village, you see the fire they've started for the feast. Beside the fire, a skeletal, starving man with diseased skin turns the handle on the spit, slowly roasting an imaginary pig.

"It's tragic the way these people delude themselves," says Balah, shaking his head at the heartrending sight.

You look at him, shocked and confused, no longer sure who to believe, including yourself. You say no more.

You cross the "sea" with Balah and return to the Pamoot village, where you find there's been a skirmish with a rival tribe.

"Look what they did to me with their spears," says one man, raising his shirt to show you his stomach. It is smooth and uninjured.

"I see you fought bravely," says Balah. "You will be rewarded, but only after you get that deep wound treated."

The man smiles and runs off to see the medicine man.

You realize that night you'd better leave before it's too late. You already have a wife, a lover, and an imaginary child. Balah has even promised to give you some governing responsibilities in the village. You feel yourself getting entangled in village life, as though the Pamoot have cast a net of imaginary relationships to trap you there. And then you see something that confirms your decision. At the victory celebration that night, there is a Caucasian man dancing among the Pamoot. He dances just as well as the Pamoot, as though he's been there a long time. You ask him his name.

"I am Nabolo," he says, revealing a French accent. "Husband of Beela and son of

Byat and Gani. I, too, am glad you've returned, Bahno. Welcome home."

He hugs you and then returns to his dancing.

You tell Alani the next morning. "I must leave the village to go hunting," you say, because you don't have the heart to tell her the truth.

Her eyes widen and a tremor passes through her. "I'll wait for you," she says.

"I'll think of you," you say.

She follows you a little ways down the path.

"I'll miss you, Bahno," she says, smiling widely even as her tears fall.

Your heart tightens, and a few steps down the path, you begin to cry, too, and then you understand that not everything about the Pamoot is imaginary.

Their breaths return to normal, and then to something slower than normal, accompanied by the pleasing feeling they are just barely alive. The flashlight has fallen to the floor, its beam gone dim.

It is a long time before either of them have the desire to talk again. The priestess resists the urge to cry by speaking first.

“Any last words?” she asks, sniffing once.

The anthropologist sighs out the last of his bodily tension. “I also have a confession to make,” he says.

The priestess is disappointed by this, believing that he has fallen into the standard pattern of doomed anthropologists, confessing their wrongs, pleading for forgiveness, groveling before anyone who’ll listen. She’d thought he was different.

“I made up all my stories,” he says.

She isn’t sure what to make of this. “They’re all lies?” she asks.

“You could say that. But they’re the best I could do with a few small pieces of truth.”

The priestess doesn’t seem to believe him, so he opens his notebook and flips through the pages for her. Most are blank. A few have drawings of dancing stick figures. A few have random scratches that even in the dim light do not seem to constitute a written language.

“And all those times I leaned against a tree and seemed to be taking notes, I only pretended to take notes because I liked to watch you dance,” he says.

A tear darts down the priestess’s cheek. “It’s a shame that you slept with me,” she says.

He wipes the tear with his thumb. “I don’t mind it, really. It was worth it.”

“You were willing to die just to sleep with me?”

“Yes,” he says, because now he knows it’s true.

“Then it doesn’t matter that your stories were lies. I believed them anyway.”

“That’s why you are the priestess.”

She lays her head on his chest. A wave of heavier rain sweeps through the forest and passes over them. For a few minutes, it’s useless to talk.

When the rain quiets again, the priestess stirs. “Are you finished collecting your thoughts?”

The anthropologist smiles and reaches for his flashlight. He bangs it against his palm to get a new beam.

It is still dark, and the rain falls steadily.

At dawn, the last few drops of rain strike the top of the rain forest canopy. They fall through the puzzle of leaves, rolling, spattering, diving, until at last they strike the forest floor and vanish in the mud.

The warriors appear at the door again. The priestess turns her head away to hide the tears.

“Take him,” she says, and the warriors grab the anthropologist and pull him out of the hammock, leaving the priestess swaying by herself, facing the wall.

“I am a collector too,” she whispers softly.

He stops and looks back at her shoulder and her softly swaying hip. “Of what?”

“Anthropologists,” she says. “Because sometimes even a priestess forgets.”

The warriors yank him through the door. He is led out into a ceremonial clearing where the villagers have formed a circle. Someone beats a drum. At the center of the

circle is a block of wood, worn smooth on top and still wet from the rain. A tall man stands casually next to it, his belly hanging over his loincloth. He is holding the anthropologist's machete, twisting it with his wrist, making lazy designs in the air. He greets the anthropologist with a nod and a shy half-smile.

The warriors tie the anthropologist's hands behind his back, then press him to his knees in front of the executioner's table.

The anthropologist feels the cool, wet wood against his cheek and smells the plantains that have been mashed on this table in preparation for a feast. He closes his eyes. The drumming stops. The executioner draws in a breath.

The anthropologist feels a very slight irritation on his head and neck that slowly turns to warmth. He has time to open his eyes one last time, to see some small part of the world.

Though a pair of hands holds his head to the block, he is able to turn his eyes to the source of the warmth. It is a ray of sunlight, the first he's seen in weeks. Somehow the tiers of tropical clouds have aligned their tiny breaks. Or else a vertical column of wind has punched a hole. He wonders at his good fortune.

Just as the executioner's machete—the anthropologist's own—swings down on his bared neck, the anthropologist smiles, knowing he is at last in the light, and that his body will soon begin to dance.