

The Mother(Land) through Narrative and Nostalgia:

The Role Stories Play in the Crafting of Imagined (Exiled) Communities

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Abstract

Comprising three novellas and critical research, this project defines and examines the possibilities of creative writing to expound upon and provide insight into issues of citizenship, belonging and memory. This interplay of narratives (creative and critical) speaks to the complex and intertextual nature of my research and is reminiscent of bricolage, defined by Matt Rogers as a 'multi-perspectival, multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approach to inquiry [...] based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality'. My thesis makes use of autobiography as case study and creative practice as research to illuminate the personal experiences of mothers and daughters separated by global movement and to study the role that the mother's storytelling plays in fostering the daughter's nostalgia for home and quest for belonging. By conducting interviews with my mother and utilising my own personal experiences as an exiled daughter to inform both my critical research and my ficto-autobiographical novellas, I have been able to draw more widely-applicable insights into the process of self-fashioning. This autoethnographical methodology bridges the gap between the personal and the public, and in the words of Heewon Chang 'transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation'.

Questions

- › Via creative practice, is it possible to facilitate a productive conversation, inclusive of 'strangers', within discourses of diaspora?
- › How does maternal storytelling influence the self-fashioning of the exiled daughter?
- › How can this influence be traced in my (ficto-autobiographical) creative work?

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I. Prudence

I am a woman who does not matter, writing letters I will never send, to a girl who will never exist. Do you think me mad? But my heart is heavy with words it wishes to utter, even if I have not the lips to speak them. I may not have lived, as others have lived through actions and noble deeds. I may not have loved, as others have loved through grand gestures and torrid embraces. My life has been that of an observer. A woman cloaked in shadows with eyes wide open. I have seen what others can not when they have been embroiled at the heart of things. This is the virtue of the outsider, I am everywhere and nowhere, I am everyone and no one. I can tell you things that they can/not. Perhaps I am as mad as they say. But we will pay them no heed, you and I. I will retreat deep into my own heart and enshroud myself in its tomb-like silence. We will sit together there with only a candle between us to illuminate our clasped hands. You will think I have saved you, but in truth it shall be you who saved me. But you will not see it yet. You have all the tempestuousness of a winter's storm now, it is only later that the calm of spring will wash over you. And only then will your heart crack open to let me in. You can be sure I will be waiting for that day. How can I know all this so early? How can I know this although it will never be? Let me tell you this, I know it because I have seen it. I know it because it will be true. I have rushed too far ahead. Let me start again. You will know me, when the time comes, by the cadence of my voice. I, of course, know you already, though we will never meet. These introductions are unnecessary, it is the ones who come earlier who matter most. Let me tell you about Her. She is the beginning, after all. She is many things. She is gold, a flower and my mother in turn. If I were an artist, I would paint Her with oils on thick canvas. I would stretch Her taut over a wooden frame. Thin elegant lines for deep-set eyes, long elegant fingers with the thumb tucked inwards and slightly parted lips revealing one of a long line of perfect white teeth. Her form does not tower but Her shadow looms large. There is something there that is not here. Do you see my meaning? She is the weaver of history, not the tall-tales of Her impoverished daughter. We spent our times together in a villa in Ω , beneath the rustling foliage of towering trees. Her kingdom was that of flowers, tilled earth and obeyed commands. My place in it was that of a beloved. And a spy. That should tell you all you need to know. A spy in the house of virtue. Shameless. Foolish. Her trees and flowers would have long crumbled to the earth before I saw the folly of it all. Now that villa houses others. Fear not, She has only risen. Eight floors, to be exact. The dirt, once black with life, now faded to grey. The sun is too bright there where once we stood shrouded and safe in shadows, with Her arms outstretched to embrace Him. I can still remember – isn't the human heart a wonderful thing? – being small enough to clasp Her waist. A sea has swept between us now and deserts have cast us wide. I never tell Her,

but here is the truth: I have given my heart to Her and have none to gift another. It would only unsettle Her. Sadden and disappoint Her. And I could never bear that, not again. Not with the seas frothing and the desert sands swirling and the world shattering slowly to dust around us. So you must see it now? Why I will never know you. Why you will never be. I am nothing and everything together. My moods trace the mountain ranges in the sky. Up and down. Up and down. What good would I be to you without Her levelling influence? I wondered how She could see what my spying eyes could not. She could see not only what was in the world, but what was in my heart. Age has tempered my peaks and troughs, time has ground them down and built them up. I have glimpses now through Her eyes. Gently and with good grace. That is how She looks upon us all. With Her gaze balanced between the now and the tomorrows yet to come. That is one of Her secrets, you see. Storms knock away my balance every now and then. Twirl my sights violently from the things I should be seeing. I am a sailor upon life's waves. Buffeted and tossed by the happenings of chance. From my crow's nest I glimpse the serenity of Her field of vision, and in the next second it is lost to me again. But those moments of clarity, of truth, few as they may be, birth the memories of Her tales. I am shamed by their beauty. You see, if I were to tell you a story, I would lie to you. I don't know what that says about me. Perhaps that will be revealed in the telling. I live in a world of sadness. Its realities are bleak with suffering, wet with the tears of the downtrodden. I speak to you now from my trough. But the tale I wish to tell you is that of the girl whom I once encountered on one of my dizzying peaks.

The Girl Who Awoke

There was once and will be someday, a world hidden from our own by a mystical enchantment. It is a land of milk and honey. It is a timeless world, laws as we know them have no sway in this realm. Minutes, hours, months and years mean nothing, time is demarcated by one thing only. The rising and setting of the sun. The sun rises in the south here and sets in the north.

It is a world of silence and of stillness. A gentle mist has lain its blanket over the terrain. For a moment everything hovers, the world trembles between sleep and wakefulness. The stars begin to lose their shimmering lustre.

Now imagine, if you will, a brilliant dawn.

The sun breaks over the horizon, bathes the world in its golden glow.

Let us linger here a moment. Upon this world.

It is a tiny world, to be sure, and a secret one too.
It dwells in a space akin to the world of man,
but is suspended in a sphere that man can never see nor ever comprehend.
It is formed of three perfect circles, one within the other.

The first and outermost circle is thus: a wild and impenetrable ancient forest.



No animals live amongst the tangled trees and roots,
only a profusion of brilliant blossoms and the humming bees to seed them.

The second circle: five cottages, each separated by distances unfathomable to humankind.

The last and innermost circle: a still blue lake,
its glassy surface unmarred by even a breath of movement,
the banks of which stretch far beyond the scope of eye and mind alike.

The sun smiles upon the southern-most cottage first.



The light settles gently over a quiet scene, scatters mist and dries dew. Breaks through a bare window and spills over a sleeping face.

A girl awakes.

Blinks against the light.

The girl is young, her face is smooth, innocent of all emotion. She sits up in a bed draped in simple white linens and looks about the blank white walls of the room.

Who is she?

It does no good to ask.

For you see, even she does not know.

She cannot tell you who she is, where she came from or how she came to be in this cottage. Her life began this very morning. She was born when the sun hit her face as she lay on the bed.

She rises and the wooden boards are cool against her bare feet. She is untroubled by her nakedness. Does not yet know what shame is. She feels neither thirst nor hunger. Only a blazing curiosity consumes her. She stands before the window, which stretches from ceiling to floor, looking out at the lake. She seems to be afloat in a sea. The world stretches out, cobalt and sapphire in all directions.

She wanders the cottage in a quiet daze. It is a short journey, for there are only two rooms. The one in which she awoke and the one into which she has walked. The room into which she has walked is the same size as the first, but here there are no windows. Rather, there are two doors. A blue door directly to her left and a green one directly to her right.



She opens the blue door. Stone steps lead down from the cottage to the lake, fade to black as they descend into the water. She follows them down. One step, then two. On the third she is ankle-deep. The water is cold. She draws back. Closes the door.

Her feet trace wet prints across the room to the green door.

The green door reveals a towering forest with a thin snaking path cutting through and disappearing over a rise. Her eyes follow the ancient, sagging shapes from root to foliage. The leaves cluster high in the heavens, dappling the ground below in shadows. The twisted trunks, twining ivy and thorny undergrowth form a wall of emerald and chestnut all along the edges of the path beneath her feet.

She follows the path out of the cottage, over the rise and through a hollow and rotted tree trunk. She walks, not measuring time or distance. Unaware even of the pebbles that press patterns into the soles of her feet.

Her heart begins to lighten.

Was it heavy? Strange for one so new to the world.

Just as it lightened, too soon, her heart sinks again. Before her looms a great and forbidding gate. It stands across the path, blocks her progress and stretches deep into the forest, at last becoming one with the towering trees.

She presses her hand to the gate. It is warm, though it is untouched by sun. The warmth seems to seep from beyond it, from where the path must continue on the other side.

Finally, she retreats, tracing her steps back out. The green door awaits her. She returns to her cottage of the white walls, to her bed of the white sheets. She sits and watches the lake.

The sun slowly tracks overhead. It casts its shimmering glow upon the water and the lake winks back in a gentle glimmer of light. Too soon, or so it seems to her, the sky is cast in shades of vermilion.

Suddenly, there is a sound. A quiet clinking, tip-tap...tip-tap, from the room beyond. The girl stands and makes her way towards the sound, towards the blue door facing the lake.

The blue of the lake is burning red with the setting sun. And there, at her feet, beating itself against the third stone step is a little glass bottle.

She sits on the first step to retrieve the bottle. It is sealed with a weathered tan cork. Inside the bottle is a rolled up piece of paper. The cork gives under her fingers with a gentle pop of sound. She plucks out the paper and unrolls it on her knee.

*“Who are you?” The world asks.
Perhaps I can answer.
Be ready when I send for you.*



So she sits and waits.

The sun cooling slowly on her bare skin.

Her eyes gazing out over the lake. From horizon to horizon all is water.

From where will her visitor appear? The sky darkens to a deep violet.

Straight ahead, in her line of sight, the sun vanishes into the lake.

But in the creeping darkness a spot of light appears to her east.

It sways back and forth before her, glowing brighter as it nears.

As the moon brightens in the sky,

it lights upon a little boat, with a swinging lantern upon its raised bow.

The little boat glides gently over the utter stillness of the lake.

She watches as it cuts a path directly towards where she is sitting.



The boat drifts up to the stone steps unerringly, though it moves without a wave to shift it, a wind to propel it or a pilot to direct it. She climbs in and sits upon the one bench with her arms wrapped around her middle, shivering without the sun's rays to warm her. The boat turns and heads back towards the east from whence it came. The journey seems long. The sky is pitch black, splattered with diamond bright stars by the time the boat drifts to a stop outside the shadowy form of another cottage.

A woman is waiting upon the stone steps, bathed in lamplight.

She smiles at the girl as the boat glides to a stop to allow her to disembark.

The woman is clad in a robe of lustrous silk, the colour of the vibrant lake. She holds out a cool hand to help the girl off the boat, up the stone steps, through the blue door and into her cottage.

“Welcome.” The woman's voice is gentle, a whisper of sound like the movement of a butterfly's wings.

She closes the door behind them and leads the girl into an elegant room. She sits on one side of a low table, cross legged and asks the girl to do the same.

“I have waited a long time for you.” The woman speaks, her lips curled almost bashfully into a smile. “But then my entire life has been passed in waiting for one thing or another.”

The Tale of the Lady in Blue

I was born in a world other than this one. Will you believe I waited to be born? My first memories are of floating in the security of my mother's belly. And of waiting. It seemed I was always too early, which I was to learn was highly impolite, and impatient, which was even worse. As I grew of age, I learned to wait on others, to be patient, to bite my tongue, to hold my peace. But that was much later. As a youth I waited for life to begin, for adventures to unfold before me. I would climb high into the branches of the gnarled cherry tree that stood beside my father's house and eat the fruits, hard and barely ripe, while I watched the merchant ships sail in and out of the harbour in the ocean below. My country was a land of kings, made wealthy by trade in silks and spices. From my seat upon that tree I would hang above the high cliffs that slashed down from the little garden in front of my house to the churning waves far far below. I ignored my mother's calls to me.

“Absence-” she would call me, for that was my name then, “where have you gone to, child?” Even then my name seemed both a prophesy to be fulfilled and an emotion already felt. My mother would blow out her cheeks in despair to find me, as many times before, cradled in the arms of my cherry tree. She would summon me to earth with her outstretched arms. I could not appreciate the beauty of that motion until it was no longer before my eyes. I would leap into them, it was what I

had been waiting for.

At night she would brush out my hair before the crackling flames of the cooking fire. She would count out one hundred and eight strokes. “For the number of times you will break my heart.”

When the year died to summon another, we stood side by side at the edge of the cliff, staring down at the tiny ships as they tossed upon the waves. The bells began to ring.

For each ring, my mother uttered her decree. “One,” she said, “for your irresponsibility. Two for your intransigence. Three for your obstinacy.”

With each ring of the bell, the wind roared savagely, whipping the waves far beneath us into a frenzy of white froth.

“Four for your dissatisfaction. Five for your delusion. Six for your lack of comprehension-”

My mother's voice was stolen from her lips by the wicked winds.

I was swept to the side, my hand torn from her light grip. Before I could summon a breath to scream I was tumbling over the edge of the cliff, careening past the jagged stone-face.

The last I saw of my mother, she was standing stock-still, her hands clutching emptiness, her mouth shaping a great big 'o' of loneliness.

Where were the out-stretched arms to catch me? What could arrest my fall?

Would you believe that the waves parted before my descent, that the waters called forth creatures to pluck me from the edges of disaster?

Let us say all this is true. And one more thing besides.

I was plunged to rest alongside the creaking mass of a great merchant ship and before the eyes of its stalwart captain. I did not know it at that moment, I will admit my fall had rendered me quite senseless, but later I learned that it was he who leapt to my rescue, risking his own soul among the crashing waves.

I revived in his cabin. He would tell me later that he found me cradled in the folds of a lily-pad, as though I had been placed there for safe keeping. For him to find and claim me.

This brave warrior of the seas, master of the ship *The Spirit Pacification*, greeted me with kindness, accepted me without reserve.

My shame is this: I did not think again of my mother, poised at that cliff edge with her empty hands and 'o' shaped mouth. I had already gone. My heart sailed ahead of the captain's ship, into adventures yet unfated.

That is how I learned that my name, Absence, also signified a lack. I was a minus, never anywhere, always less than I should be.

On the second day of the new year, on the second day that we had known each other, the captain summoned me to his chamber. He bade me sit before a long table set with the most lavish

banquet. We feasted on the freshest fish, salted by the sea itself, the sweetest fruit, torn by the wind from my very own cherry tree of so long ago. In the silence I saw that his face was weathered. Creased in handsome but soul-weary ways. His eyes seemed the saddest I had ever seen. As though each of those hundred and eight bells had rung for him as well as for me.

“Absence.” His voice carried the deep resonance of an echoing cave. “You are young. Too young, yet, to fear what lies ahead of you. Listen, if you will, to a man you have seen more than you. A man grown wise through weariness. It may surprise you to know that this was not always my ship. It had another captain before me...”

The Story of *The Spirit Pacification* and its Captain

I was not born to a life at sea. I was, in fact, a farmer's son. We lived, my father, mother and my four brothers (of which I was the youngest) in a humble house at the edge of the family field. My people had lived there for three generations. Each generation had built upon the one before it. Our house was a symbol of this, it jutted out at odd angles from where each heir had constructed a new layer to add to the structure. I lived in that little house and tilled the earth with a contentment borne of true joy. I knew my world and understood my place within it. All was well, or so I thought. But I was soon to learn that one can not live in a bubble, separate and safe from the dreams and despairs of others.

With age, I can look back and understand that my parents struggled to feed and clothe us. I can understand that they were forced to look beyond the borders of our little farm when seeking to guide their sons into manhood. But as a young man, at that time, I felt cast out. Betrayed. I did not see how hard it had been for them to find me a position as a kitchen assistant at the Palace, how many favours they had had to beg, how many times they were forced to swallow their pride on my account. I did not see the opportunities that had suddenly opened up before me. I saw only that I was being sent away. I left my parents' land with a heavy heart but without a backwards glance.

It came to pass that in my fifteenth year, two years after I joined the Palace staff, the Heavenly Sovereign who ruled over my father's land and that of our neighbours as far as my eyes could see, fell deathly ill. My work in the Palace tripled as I scurried back and forth between the kitchens and the Sovereign's bedchamber. I carried, scrubbed, heated, chopped and ran until every bone in my body creaked in protest. But every faded tapestry has a vivid underside and my work meant that I was privy to most of the miraculous events that transpired in the weeks that followed the Sovereign's decline.

Now, the Heavenly Sovereign had four sons and a daughter. Four princes, each hungry for a

piece of their father's glory. But the Heavenly Sovereign was a wise man, age had whitened his beard and creased his brow with the burden of wisdom. He saw that his sons, each with their own merits and weakness, would feud over his kingdom and through their struggles bring suffering upon his people. As he lay dying, he gathered the princes to his bedside, while the princess sat at his pillow, her face set in an unfathomable mask, her body as still as a statue.

“Each of you four is fit to be Sovereign.” The father said to his sons. “But only one can take the crown. Follow the four winds beyond the mountains of our lands. I task you each to seek the 'one true good' and to return here within one cycle of the moon. The son who pleases me most will win my crown.”

With these words, the Heavenly Sovereign sent his sons from the kingdom. At first sunrise, they each rode from the kingdom, each following, as they had been commanded, a single path through the mountains. The princess did not join the rabble that gathered in the courtyard to watch the princes depart, but looking up in the midst of my revelry, I happened to catch her form framed between the fluttering curtains of her father's bedchamber. She did not seem a princess then. In that instant she looked just as lonely as I was. I realised that her task was nowhere near as romantic as those of her siblings. It was her duty to tend her ailing father.

The princess, I must confess, had become a fascination of mine during my time in the Palace. There was something about her that was wholly unexpected. At least, *I* had not expected it.

You see, growing up as a poor boy on my father's farm, I would often gaze towards the great stone edifice that sat on the horizon and dream of what I would have been had I been born a prince in the Palace instead of a peasant in its shadow. There were four princes in my kingdom...we were four sons on the farm. It was easy to cast those roles, to imagine I was one of them.

It was a rare privilege to spend so much time imagining a place and then to find oneself living there. I saw that the princes were much as I had dreamed them – full of sparkle and swagger. They tore through the corridors in a cacophony of arrogance – boisterous laughter, outlandish language, flamboyant good cheer – all gilded with fat tassels, luxurious fabrics and precious stones. But the princess was something else entirely.

She was stillness itself. She rarely spoke, but when she did so she had the power to arrest the listener. Her voice carried a surprising bass to it, low and sure. She spoke sparingly and with purpose. Her steps were silent, like a predator in pursuit of its prey. She dressed simply – her only ornament a low slung belt knotted together with rectangles of some crisp white fabric – and behaved impeccably but there was something about her that was indefinable. An aura that swirled in her wake like a current and that I could not then name.

The Heavenly Sovereign ruled the kingdom but it was whispered that the princess ruled the

Sovereign. And in many ways, this was true. His eyes sharpened when he listened to her speak, perhaps with less indulgence than with which he viewed his sons, but with a silence that showed how much stock he put in her words.

I will admit willingly that I cared less for the Sovereign's health and more for the company of the princess in those days and in the princes' absence she rarely found cause to leave her father's side. Fetching broths, elixirs, hot water infusions, I had plenty of reason to be near the royal bedchamber and it was not difficult to find excuses to tarry once I had gained entrance there. I observed the princess tending her father ceaselessly. While he slept, she instructed the ladies of the house to journey to the farms around the kingdom, gathering herbs and medicines from all corners of the land to aid her beloved father's recovery. She was consumed with his health. Every single day that I entered the Sovereign's bedchamber to deliver the concoctions the cook had prepared, the princess was there to receive the bowl, to prop her father's head upon his pillows, to feed him by her own hand. She wiped his brow when he perspired, she changed his sheets and cleaned the room. When I dared once to ask if I may call upon other servants to help her, she answered that she did not want others to see her father thus. It would shame the Heavenly Sovereign, she said, for others to see him when he was weak. It was her duty, furthermore, to see to her father's health, she being of his flesh and having only concern for him in her heart. Each evening she passed at her father's side, and each evening her father would ask after the fate of his sons. Night after night I would deliver the evening repast and listen as she told her father she had not yet heard word of her brothers. Night after night the same sorry exchange. Until the nights blurred into weeks, then months.

Until, finally, one night, just as I was passing through the door on my way out I heard the low thunder of her voice rumble that her messengers had arrived. I glanced back as quickly as I dared and caught sight of her at her father's pillow, her vitality almost insolent – large and colourful – when set alongside the sunken waxen pallor of the old man almost swallowed up in the giant bed. I will never forget it. She sat at an angle, an elbow braced on the pillow beside her father's head, one hand held aloft, palm up. Four small shapes sat on her palm. Stiff. Crisp. Like the knots on her belt. Paper.

She blew over the still forms and there was a sudden flurry of motion. A black round figure began to creep forward pendulously across her palm, while a lithe white form stretched its spine and two shapes took to the air, azure wings unfurling on one and vermilion ones flapping on the other.

My heart in my throat, I froze outside the room, torn with indecision. It was not unusual for me to wait outside the room, I had been asked to do so scores of times before. I risked everything in that moment to leave the door just slightly ajar. To strain with all my might towards the tiny crack of space between worlds and to listen to the rumble of the princess's voice with all the focus in my

being as she began to speak.

The Tales of the Home-Bound Daughter

My dearest father, my place has always been at your side. Since my earliest childhood days, mere memories now; dissipating clouds of recollection clinging to the edges of a storm, when I clung to my mother's hand and went out into the villages, I have never strayed in body beyond these palace walls. I have only known these corridors and your love. I know that you only sought to keep me safe from danger. Having lost my mother, you clung to me. I know it is love that precipitated your actions. I have stood by your side a hundred times to bid farewell to my brothers as they rode from the palace gates. Many more times I have stood alone to watch you all ride away together. My days, father, are all the same. I am bound, by your love and your fear, in this body and within these walls.

But the nights, father, have always been my own. I kept what company I pleased and followed my new friends willingly where ever they led. The black one, the white one, the vermilion one, the azure one and I, the sun at their centre – we streaked from these walls and through the stars. I have crawled far from here and hundreds of years hence. I have flown far, to ancient forests and mythical lands. I have breathed flames and pounced on prey. I have torn raw bloody flesh from shattered bones with my teeth and seared civilizations to ash as an afterthought.

No, father, don't be afraid. Here, feel my hand – I am still flesh and bone, mortal, alive – you see that there has never been anything to fear. You should have told me then, when I was small enough to cling to your waist, when I wept at the loss of my mother, of the worlds that she had revealed to you. It would have been a comfort to me in those times when I was so lost and alone.

Now, you lie here, as trapped as I have been. I want you to understand that I know what it is to be where you are. You need not be alone in this. I understand the turmoil of not being truly seen, of being more than you seem to be, of appearing diminished when blazing within. I know your loneliness and I am here to guide you through.

One night so many moons ago, I lay just as you do now. The palace slept and all around me there was silence. I lay in my bed and was swallowed up by it, the room stretched out into eternity. The stars burst around me in dizzying swirls of colour. The void yawned and in its depths I saw – everything. All at once. In an instant. I was a weary traveller at the end of my journey, a babe cradled in my mother's belly, a skeleton mouldering in its grave, a child, a woman. The sensations washed over me like a deluge and I was adrift in an ocean.

The stars around me drifted up and over my head and the bed beneath me sank away. The icy waters – black with the turbulence of being – washed over me. My nostrils, my lungs flooded in

a single panicked inhale of breath. Salted earth, green with decay, blue with sky pushing down down down upon my head. And I sank deep where there was silence again. Where peace beckoned like the silence of the tomb. Where peace threatened. But I shattered it with my struggles, dispersed it with my bubbling cries, rent it with my clawing fingers, tore it limb from limb.

I was a bursting star, swirling black, exploding yellow – roaring fire and unfurling wings of flame. Blazing outwards for an eternity then drawing it all back within me. The stars, the deluge, the silence. I swallowed them all and stood upon a pinpoint of light at the edge of all things. It seemed to me that I balanced on the tiny dot over a gaping abyss, the breadth and depth of which I could not even begin to fathom.

A whisper flowed out like honey from all around me. As smooth as silk, there and not there, like an assassin's deadly tread. "You have called to me and I have come."

Across the vastness that rendered me insignificant, through time, memory and space that voice called to me. It was the anonymous echo of a voice I had once known, but repetition had blunted its blade-like edges and crinkled its centre with dust and cobwebs.

"Mother." I said it and knew it to be true.

"I have come and now you must ask," the voice again, like autumn leaves crackling numbly against stone floors.

I stood in my point of light. "Save me," I said and stepped outwards and into the void.

"You must ask and I must obey." The voice shattered into a million fragments, each taking flight in a rush of movement.

I plummeted, heavy, into the silence once more but from the darkness came a sudden surge of sound, a cacophony of crisp, cutting cadence. My mother had plucked me from the ether and I landed on her outstretched palm. The air around me shimmered with colour, dissolved into light. The warm hills and valleys of her palm were against my back. Her face loomed gigantic before me. That familiar beloved face.

I awoke on my ordinary bed in the usual palace beneath the familiar sun. But I had been transformed. You may be Sovereign but it is only of this realm, I have seen things to come and moments that have passed, exchanged vows with beings beyond your reckoning, become many and other and sometimes – become nothing at all.

Do not worry, beloved father, I will always remain of this world, of your blood. But I have become more than you had imagined for me. I have the knowledge that your heart desires most, my father. I have poured water, lit flames, and drunk tea. The ceremony is complete. The answers have come from afar and I know it will do your soul good to hear them.

The messengers I sent out have returned and I know now how my four brothers fare. I know

you have suffered in waiting for some word and now allow me to ease your concerns. My messengers are slow travellers but they have journeyed far and through unconventional means to bring us news of my brothers' progress. They have shared their tales amongst themselves and finally with me.

You have asked and I must answer, dear father. I shall speak of my north-bound brother. My messengers tell me that he is well, though weary, and is deep in searching for your 'one true good'.

Last night my brother took rooms in a simple inn and passed his evening repast in the company of another lone traveller – an old, portly man with an insatiable curiosity and affable manner who remained the entire time ensconced in a black travelling cloak. When asked what wonders he had encountered on his journey, my brother eagerly began to speak of the events that had befallen him since that day he had set out over the mountain borders of our kingdom, following the northern winds.

The Tale of the North-Bound Son

After my brothers and I parted ways, I took the northern path through the mountains. The path was treacherous and steep and my horse laboured to pass over the tumbling pebbles and dislodged stones. A day's riding did not take me far and that first night I made camp in a deep cavern carved within the rock face. I sat that night, shivering in the wilderness with only a small fire and my furs to warm me. I thought over my father's task and my heart sank at the enormity of what lay before me.

The 'one true good', my father had said. I could not think what this could be. Late into the night, I lay on my furs, watching as the embers cooled upon the fire. I must have slept.

I dreamed that I walked in a land shrouded by clouds. The air was coloured in tones of violets and thick with incense. I waded through the clouds, they sucked at my legs like mud, threatening to pull me under. I struggled on. Ahead of me was a structure of delicate build. Four slender columns rose up from the clouds, supporting a delicate roof threaded with flowers the likes of which I had never seen. As I neared this sight I perceived that a figure stood among the columns, with its back to me. A tall slender form draped in robes of dazzling white.

The pull on my legs grew stronger, until I was knee deep among the clouds. Then too soon, I was pulled under to my waist. I fought with all my strength to reach the figure but only sank to my neck for all my efforts. I cried out in terror, the clouds seemed to me a source of evil. I could sense the power in them.

The figure turned and for the barest second I beheld a face of utter feminine beauty. A face

of such purity that I gasped to see it. Then, in a rush of movement, the clouds had pulled me under.

I awoke to sunlight filtering in through the gaping mouth of the cavern. I lay upon my tangled bedding, hearing the squawking of the morning birds outside, hope awakening in my breast. I felt that the fates had gifted me with a vision. They had answered my most fervent prayer and aided me on my quest. I felt I had my answer. What was the 'one true good'? Surely, if anything, it was the lady from my dreams. A woman of unimaginable beauty and purity.

I understood my quest then, saw the path I had to take. I would have to find that woman. I would seek out her land of clouds and incense, seize her and return with my prize to claim my father's crown.

I set out with renewed vigour, pushing my stallion to its limits. I did not know where I would find the object of my search, but I thought to reach the nearest town and from there find a wise person who would lead me on my way. I saw her face before me as I rode. I reached town by nightfall and rode to the house of the village elder, asking directions of passers-by as I went. It was a small settlement, with simple homes dotting the landscape, but the house of the elder was grand, fronted with blossoming fruit trees and set at the apex of a forked little river. The sound of trickling water greeted my ears as I dismounted and made myself known to the owner of the house.

The elder came forth from the dwelling and seeing my standard and knowing me to be the son of the Heavenly Sovereign he greeted me with respect and led me into his house. He bade me sit and called upon his servants to fetch us wine, meat and fruit. I was grateful for his hospitality and the warmth and comfort of his house after a night spent upon the cold stone floor of a dank cavern. But I was also eager to be on my way. I knew my journey would be great and every second I dallied, I imagined one of my brothers beating me to our coveted prize. I was forced, finally to interrupt our general chatter and tell him of my task and my dream. I told him I sought that woman. The elder sat deep in thought for some moments, sipping slowly from his wine.

"I have heard tell," he said finally, "of a princess of boundless beauty and good grace. With a purity of soul that could make the very angels weep."

My heart leapt in my breast. I asked him to tell me where this princess could be found but the elder hesitated. When I pressed him to speak more, thinking to bribe him with gold or silks if I must, he stopped me with a shake of his head.

"You misunderstand me, young prince," he said finally. "It is not that I will not tell you where she lives, but that I can not. Her world is separate from others. She lives in time, not in place. She is the Dawn itself. That moment that slays the night and births day. She may be admired from afar but can never be found."

At his words I fell into a deep despair. I felt sure that the lady of whom he spoke, this

princess of dawn, was the same one that I sought. For what could be purer than that moment when all was new?

I stayed with the elder that day and passed the night as well. I lay beneath the fruit trees, and cooled my feet in one of the twin rivers that flowed past. I pondered on how to find my princess. But how could one grasp the intangible? How could a mortal seize a moment in time?

The next morning, I bid the elder farewell and set forth from the town, determined to find some way to succeed. I dwelled on my troubles as I rode, undiscerning that rain poured upon me, then dried again. The terrain had opened up from rugged mountain passes into grassy plateaus. I rode further and further north and night passed into day and day to night in a ceaseless cycle, unheeded. Many days passed thus and though I was awake before daybreak, I never could sight the elusive princess nor think of a way to do so.

One night as I lay on my furs, weary nigh to breaking, I was recalled to myself by the arrival of a traveller. A stooped little man, he shuffled towards me out of the darkness, leading a donkey burdened by a heavy load. An incongruously brilliant blue blanket flapped from his shoulders and dragged a trail behind him in the earth.

He asked if he might share my fire, and though I did not much want the company, good manners decreed that I ask him to sit and partake of my sparse meal of hunted rabbit. To my surprise the traveller seemed to know of me and my journey, although I had long since passed from my father's kingdom.

“I have come from the east,” he said, “and on my travels there encountered your brother.”

“My brother! Tell me what has become of him? How does he fare on his voyage?”

The Traveller, the Widow and the East-Bound Son

Most honoured prince, the traveller began, I am but a simple merchant. As you see, I carry my wares with me and journey far to conduct what business I can. I met your brother on the eve of my departure from my family. It is always a sad occasion, to leave loved ones behind, and the dangers of travel are never to be overlooked. So, as is my custom, I feasted with my family and then set about handing out alms to the poor and needy of my village, so as to encourage the favour of fate and earn a trouble-free pass along my voyage. As I walked along the road, passing fruit and bowls of gruel to the many outstretched hands, I was drawn to one beggar in particular. He did not seem to be as the others. Though he was bedraggled and his face was lined with exhaustion and marked with the ravages of hunger, his hands were strong but soft and his eyes carried a keen intelligence. I called him to me to ask what misfortune had brought him so low and he surprised me by telling me

that he was a prince from a far-away kingdom, on a quest for the 'one true good'.

“I feel I have searched till the ends of the earth for my prize and I am weary,” he said to me.

I took him back to my house, where my good wife fed him and ministered to his many wounds.

Now, don't start with concern. I left him well enough, but it seemed to me he had encountered some troubles along his journey, and his voyage until then seemed to have been a difficult one. Thankfully the fates had smiled upon him, he was (as you well know) a strong and able man, and after only a few hours in my company, he was beginning to recover from his hardships.

He told me that he had been travelling for many days in search of a certain widow of tragic but glorious fame. He told me that this widow was certainly the 'one true good' for which he searched.

Now, as luck would have it I had heard of this fabled woman. She had, at a very young age, been wed to a man of great wealth and esteem. For a time she had lived very happily, her every whim catered to by servants, her every desire fulfilled. Her husband doted on her and kept her in the finest of palaces from which she could gaze upon the most beautiful lands. Her husband had always longed for a son to inherit his many shops and lands, but the woman seemed to be only able to birth him daughters. After the first daughter, the man was still hopeful, after the fifth, he began to despair. As his wife grew old, he began to realize that his dreams of having a son were to be dashed and he began to give way to the dark things that too often tempt men from goodness. He began to drink, to gamble and before long had lost all his businesses and most of his lands to his creditors and found himself in debt. He began to treat his faithful wife badly, he took concubines into his home and no longer cared for the welfare of his tenants. His people began to suffer. When even his concubines began to bear him daughters, his mind must have become unhinged with grief. He gave himself up fully to the darkness within him. He had dishonoured his wife, broken his most sacred vows to her, had disgraced himself before his people. He hung like an evil spectre over the region and nature itself seemed to turn against him, to rise up in protest against the abomination he had become. His wife understood this and just as she knew that her husband must be stopped, so she understood that only the purest sacrifice could defeat the deepest evil. She smuggled a holy man from the mountains into the palace in the dead of night and called her daughters to her, one to hold her head and four to secure her arms and legs. Over the heart-rending sobs of her daughters, the holy man chanted words in an ancient tongue. With his sword he tore out the poor woman's still-beating heart and set it upon a flame infused with bitter spices. The heart beat and burned within the flames for a full day. Then the holy man took the ashes it had become and mixed it with wine for the daughters to give to their

father with his dinner. You see the sacrifice she had made? She gave her heart to one who had lost his. Upon drinking the brew, the husband became sensible to what he had done. He overcame his darkness and returned once again to the light. He worked hard to repay his debts and earn back his good name. In honour of his wife, who had sacrificed so much, he built a great shrine, within which they buried what remained of the woman. Until this day she is revered and called The Widow, although it is she who died. For, you see, it is the same word as mother. The woman who gives without taking.

When I told him this tale, your brother was inconsolable with grief.

“Ah!” The prince exclaimed, beating at his heart. “I have suffered for nothing. The object of my search is dead.”

But I told him this was not so. After all, the locals of that region still held her shrine sacred, and those in need of the widow's kindness could always go and collect some dirt from her grave to bring them good fortune.

“Then that is what I shall do.” And so, your brother and I prepared to part ways. I led him, myself, to the outskirts of my village and we passed one last night in each other's company, thinking to begin our separate journeys in the morning.

As we sat in companionable silence we were both startled to observe the rapid approach of a mounted rider from my village. The rider collapsed at our feet and went on his knees before your brother. His mud and dust striped white tunic and weary face spoke of a savage ride.

“Honoured prince,” the rider gasped, “bless the fates that I have reached you at last. I come with a message from your honourable brother, who even at this moment rides west beyond the plains, and have journeyed far to deliver it to you.”

The Tale of the West-Bound Son

First of all, good prince, let it be known that I am a simple man. I make my living quietly and live according to my means. I met your brother at a feast thrown by a great man in a kingdom far from here. Your brother, the prince, attended the feast as a visitor to the kingdom and at the behest of he who threw it. The feast had been organised, at great cost and with much pomp and circumstance for the wedding of the great man's only child, a young maiden.

The celebration was especially heart warming as the union had not been arranged. No, indeed it was a love match, a rare and wondrous thing in our times. Especially when it is brought about by such a happy twist of fate as befell this splendid bride and her handsome groom. As luck would have it they came to know and love each other through a series of letters long before they

ever laid eyes on one another and by that time it was far too late. Hearts had been lost. It is whispered that the letters, at first quite bland and purely to do with some of their parents' business dealings, blossomed quickly into professions of love and proposals of marriage. And as the groom was of noble birth and decent character, the bride's father happily consented to their union. The bride's father organised a lavish banquet, invited all the citizens of the town to join in their happy celebrations and as word had reached him that your honourable brother was in the vicinity, begged his attendance at the festivities.

I see you grow impatient with my tale, but what I have so far told you is important in light of the message with which your brother has charged me. You see, it was at this marriage feast that a grave misfortune befell your brother. I was seated at his side during the festivities and thus beheld the look in his eyes as he gazed upon the bride and groom-to-be. They lit up with an inner fire, as though he was at last seeing something he had long been searching for.

Now, I should tell you that the bride was not a beauty. Rather, she was a common-looking girl. Her eye sight being quite poor she suffered from a pronounced squint. She was burdened with a shuffling gait. Yet, despite all this, she was much beloved and treasured by a groom who was so comely of face that some women at the feast wept at the sight of him. And it was all due to her marvellous character. The bride was imbued with a sharp mind and abundant charm.

Of course, people being what they are, there were many conversations among the gossips of the town as to why such a man would favour such a woman. They wondered if her father's wealth had swayed him. But this could not be so, as the groom himself was many times more wealthy than his father-in-law. The gossips whispered that perhaps the groom had some serious flaw in his character that made him unsuitable for a more attractive bride. Yet, try as they would to find fault with the union, they could not. All seemed as it should be. And though the town's people found it difficult to understand at first, it seemed that it was truly love that bound the two young people together. A love so pure that it could overcome the vanities of the flesh. I will not say that everyone who attended the feast did so with pure intent. There were many among the revellers who were simply waiting for the dark truth to out, and yet others who went as though to observe some strange spectacle. But many went to see something that everyone yearned to experience but very few ever would: true love.

I saw the look in your brother's feverish eyes and dared to ask him what had brought on his sudden tension and excitement. He seemed unwilling to speak at first, but it soon became clear that his excitement had reached such a fever pitch that he was desperate to share his thoughts, to lessen his burden. He spoke to me of your father's task to his four princes to find the 'one true good'.

“This is surely what my father, may he be blessed, spoke of. What greater good is there than

the purest love known to man? Here I see before me a couple who bear each other the best kind of love, as the poets of old used to sing.”

“But how can you take their love to your father?” I asked him.

“My crown,” your brother spoke harshly, “rests on my ability to bring my father the 'one true good'. I will not fail him.”

I still did not understand, could not comprehend what your brother intended to do, but I swallowed my misgivings, fearing – pardon, but I must speak honestly – the crazed look of his eyes and tone of his voice. He seemed maddened with a singular purpose.

Alas, it is at such times, when one is focused with all their being upon one aim, that danger lurks most fervently. For at such times, one is blinkered and does not observe what stands beside them until it is too late.

I felt, however, that I had already overstepped my bounds by questioning a prince of the realm and did not wish to push the matter any further.

As I sat through course after course of sumptuous food at your brother's elbow, I saw that he was also drawing the gaze of the bride's father. After casting many looks in our direction, the old man finally stood in a swirl of red velvet and made his way to your brother's side. A guest stood to make room and the old man reclined between your brother and me and greeted your brother respectfully.

I strove not to listen, but you understand how hard it is to disregard a conversation taking place so near and I could not avoid hearing the details of the discussion that commenced between them.

The Tale of the Old Man and the South-Bound Son

Most honourable prince, the old man began, please forgive me my presumptuousness in speaking to you so openly, but I would ask how your father fares? I have heard rumours that he has been gravely ill.

“I left my father very ill indeed but in strong spirits,” responded your brother, the prince.

I am glad to hear it, the old man continued, your father is a good man and wise. Word had reached us that he had sent his four sons on searches that took them far from their kingdom. I see now that you are here, that it is true.

My guests here today have travelled from far and wide to attend this celebration and earlier I had the pleasure of conversing with a merchant from the southern provinces. Having seen you before and, I must admit, assuming you would attend this feast, I told him that we would be in the

company of princes. I apologise for this but I admit freely to being cursed with too much pride. But who can blame me on such a day and with my daughter set to marry such a decent man?

As I spoke with that merchant from the southern provinces, he happened to tell me that while selling his produce at the large market there he was one day approached by a tall man he felt sure was your brother. Your brother, this merchant said, had been dressed as a common man, but his bearing was that of a noble. The merchant immediately recognised your brother as a man of some importance and bade him rest a while at his stall while he finished serving his customers. Your brother duly waited, seeming to be glad to rest his feet but passed his time in perusing some papers he had in his keeping. When the merchant had bidden his farewells to the last of his customers and closed up his shop for the night, he invited your brother to dine with him at his house. Your brother accepted his offer most graciously.

The merchant's wife is a kindly and generous woman and she hurried to accommodate their guest and proved herself over the course of the meal to be both an intelligent speaker and a thoughtful listener. Dinner passed in the most entertaining way and the night drew late as the diners caroused with true pleasure. Though your brother seemed to enjoy his evening, it was not long before the merchant and his wife noticed that his mood continued to be distracted and that he would glance continually at the papers he refused to set aside for even a moment. Finally, their curiosity won over their good manners and they pressed your brother to tell them why the papers were so important to him.

“These papers,” said your brother, “shall win me my father's crown.”

The merchant and his wife were baffled by the prince's statement and begged him to explain what he meant by it. The prince explained that the Heavenly Sovereign had sent him and his brothers on a quest and that the papers he had managed, through much difficulty, to obtain were the very definition of what your father had wished him to bring back.

“What I hold here, my friends,” your brother remarked, “is surely the 'one true good' of which my father spoke. Contained on these pages are the wise words of a hermit who lives in the woods not far from here.”

The merchant had heard of the hermit and remarked that surely, rather than wise, the hermit was a madman. The hermit had forsaken people and lived only with his goats for company among the ancient trees. He had not even a house to call his own, sleeping instead in a barrel he had rolled from the town on his departure. The merchant asked the prince how such a man could be considered wise.

“The hermit has forsaken all the world's vanities,” the prince intoned. “He does not seek riches or fame, nor to collect fine arts or beautiful concubines. He lives simply, taking from the

earth and giving back to it. Surely he is the wisest amongst us. His words of wisdom, whisperings he has gleaned from the trees and brooks themselves, I am certain must be the 'one true good'."

The merchant and his wife thought long on this and though they did not fully accept the prince's words, dared not gainsay him when he was in such a passion. They soon turned to other topics and passed the night pleasantly in each other's company, with no more talk of the subject that had so inflamed the prince.

The Tales of the Home-Bound Daughter

So far, my father, these are the tales of my four brothers. Their journeys have been difficult and trying, it is true, but they have found new purpose in your quest and do their utmost to please you and win your favour.

But I see that your eyes grow heavy with sleep, dear father. The hour is late and you need your rest. Do not worry, I will not leave your side. I will stay here and speak to you for as long as you wish to hear my voice. Close your eyes, allow yourself to rest now. I am here.

Do you see now? How easily the mantle of loneliness can be shed?

For me, as a little girl, it was nothing short of an epiphany. One moment I was borne down, suffocating. And the next, flung out and torn asunder. Free. That night in the void with my mother steered me down an ivy choked, spider web-draped path. Virgin dirt. Ancient trees. Tangled branches. And I speared through with my messengers, my night-time guides and guardians, slicing through the air in a frenzied dance around me.

In this place where all things converged, I saw that time was a star-burst and dancing in its infinite shimmering sparks – the unfolding tales of human history. The threads that weave our todays with the yesterdays of those long gone and the tomorrows of those yet to come and knot in the infinity of our repetition and expansion. Outwards like a ripple, or inwards to the drain, I could not be certain. I only knew that an umbilical cord had been severed. And it had been my own mother who had wielded the blade. She had set me adrift. A loving cruelty. She tore her own flesh to set me free. And drenched in the mingled flow of our common blood, I was purified anew and I understood...

Everything...

And I was again in that place where I became nothing.

"You have called to me and I have come."

But this time the words whispered through my veins, beat in my heart.

I sat and the planets swirled purple and gold to fashion me a throne.

I sat and parted my lips and reached with my own fingers deep within myself. My throat widened like a serpent to my arm, tightened to my fingers and moulded to the ball they pulled free from the pits of my being. I held the opaque white ball in the palm of my hand and it glowed in the void that pressed down around me, shimmering with the incandescence of my accumulated fears.

Within me, where my terrors had once resided – only silence now dwelled.

Saliva slicked over my fingers as I unravelled the ball, laid it flat and fanned out three square sheets. My fears given form in the solid lines and curves of black ink.

I returned to that place where the stars tilted up and the waters opened up beneath me and cast one sheet out with the tides. The water bled through the paper slowly and pulled my fears back down with it into the fathomless depths.

I soared to where land disappeared amongst clouds and pressed one sheet deep into the earth and marked its grave with a single stone.

In a swirl of spring showers, summer heat, autumn foliage and winter frost I came to the centre of things and singed the last sheet to cinders with my inner flames.

Do you see how easy it all was? How easy it always will be?

Just like that.

One, two, three...

Like a throne fashioned from star matter, or a universe held aloft in a withered palm. All things were possible to me. I had only to call to her and she would come. I had only to will it and it would be so.

And in all these years of my life, all those sad childhood days of solitude, all those wondrous nights of enchantment, I have only desired one thing...

To be to you as my brothers have been to you... To be the repository of your hopes and dreams, the fountain-head of your best ambitions for the kingdom. I wish to be your future. The future of this place. Of these people. To matter. To be one amongst the others – No, better yet – to be *the* one. I will it. With all my being and the infinity of my night-time worlds, I will it.

My Heavenly Sovereign, my dearest father, do you see my little messengers? Can you see how carefully creased their edges are, how crisply folded their corners? My mother made these with the greatest of care, I can feel it in their weight. Like the burning heat of the summer sun, settling like a living thing upon your skin – feather light but deeply substantial all the same. Would you like to feel?

You are letting the fear rule you again, when we both know there is no longer any need. Here, be still. Feel them upon your chest.

It is a marvel, is it not? How light they are?

Almost as though they have seeped into you and are no more.

The Story of *The Spirit Pacification* and its Captain

I drew my head back from the door in a rush and pressed for a second against the wall with my hand to my chest. The princess's baritone pounded out in my skull, a savage echo of my beating heart. I fled all the way to the servants' quarters and breathed easy only once I had sealed the door firmly shut behind me.

With all my being and the infinity of my night-time worlds, I will it. Her rumble of a voice had been almost guttural then, a wounded body dragged ragged over shards of glass.

I stayed where I was with my skull cradled in my palms, my breaths panting between my lips. I was not sure what I had heard. I was not sure exactly what I had seen. But it had been...something. An Event of Significance.

If only I'd had the wit to know then what it was. To follow my instincts, to gird my loins and declare to all what I had seen. But you must understand that I was young. And more than that, I was only a poor farmer's son. As meaningless in the great spectacle of things as a speck of dust. A peasant amongst Heaven-sent Sovereigns, a dumb pawn in the incomprehensible games of the Gods.

I stayed where I was and felt my smallness. Felt it like a blade twisting up through the soft flesh of my belly.

What I had glimpsed... What I thought I had glimpsed was beyond the power of my wit to comprehend. Shivers washed over me and I fought to control them. I would not have long to regain my senses, a million tasks awaited me in the kitchens. Any second now the cook's shrill tones would be screeching out my name, intruding upon my desperately needed solitude, hurling out epithets, taunts, threats. I tried to calm my breathing...

Almost as though they have seeped into you and are no more.

Into the relative safety of the darkness behind my closed eyelids intruded the image of those four crisp colourful shapes melting slowly into the Heavenly Sovereign's chest as he lay trembling in his great bed. The princess's profile set, as though struck in gold, devoid of all emotion. The entire tableau was stitched like a tapestry across the ribbons of my memory.

In due course, I returned to my duties but my mind strayed often to what it had seen and I earned several cuffs across the ear from the cook as reward for my distraction. I fell into my cot in an exhausted stupor hours later, long after the princess must have taken to her bed... or rather, I suppose...taken flight...

I dreamt of her throughout the night and awoke with a start to the disorienting sight of the cook's bulging angry face looming a hairsbreadth over mine. The man had been trying to awaken me for several minutes and stood now in a frothing rage. I cowered, cringing from the little flecks of spittle that flew from the man's lips, as the cook cursed me into movement, interspersing his insults with snarled complaints as to the unusually harried nature of the day that lay before us. It seemed that the Heavenly Sovereign had called for a gathering of the court in the great hall and it was our duty, of course, to prepare everything before the guests converged.

So it came to pass that as twilight fell over the kingdom and the great hall filled to near bursting, I stood pressed into a corner, awaiting the cook's order to rush forward with my laden tray. I was still out of breath from having to rush to the servant's quarters to change into my florid and uncomfortably stiff evening uniform.

The sudden hush drew my eyes to the raised dais and I strained on my tiptoes to take in the grand event unfolding before me. To say I was curious would have been a gross understatement, but it was not that particular emotion that held my body in a trembling readiness. It was fear.

The Heavenly Sovereign was taking his seat upon his throne. At his side, looming larger than life, as always, was his daughter. My first sight of the Sovereign since the night before took me quite aback. He drew the eye, as he did in the magnificent portraits dotted around the palace of him in his youth. The Heavenly Sovereign seemed stronger than I had ever seen him, seemed in fact to be imbued with a singular purpose and determined to carry it through. The frail, desiccated old man of the previous night was no more.

“My people,” the Heavenly Sovereign began to speak at last and his voice was strong and certain, “you know that my four sons have journeyed far from the kingdom at my behest. Now I must tell you why and make a confession to you. I may sit upon this throne but I will admit now that I have been troubled by the emotions which plague any father who hovers at the edge of life. I could not choose which of my four sons would wear my crown. I have doted upon, loved and raised each one to rule but when the time for choosing was at hand, I could not do it. So I sent them on a journey, hoping that fate and destiny would release me from my burden. I tasked them each to find me the 'one true good' and sent them from me. I wanted to see what their hearts and minds would lead them to bring back to me. But fate cannot be led in such a manner and destiny has always already been written. Even the actions of the Heavenly Sovereign cannot sway them in their path. As I lay dying upon my bed, my daughter,” here he took the princess's hand in his own, “tended to my every need and passed the many hours she spent ministering to me by telling me the most wonderful tales. I slept each night with her voice in my ear and her cool hand upon my brow. And last night I dreamed. I dreamt a lady approached me in a snowy land. Her brow was creased, but by

wisdom rather than time.

'I am the love of wisdom,' the lady said to me in a voice pregnant with meaning, 'come to aid the Heavenly Sovereign in his search for the "one true good". Must I speak what is already in your heart?'

'What do you mean?' I beseeched her.

'Do not seek outside what lies within,' she replied.

I awoke and my eyes settled immediately upon my daughter. The 'one true good' had been before me the entire time. My daughter bears it within her. She embodies the ideal, the ultimate superiority of things of the mind. My daughter is the 'one true good' for which I sent my sons out on their fruitless search. Thus I decree that it is my daughter, the princess, who shall inherit my crown."

The next few hours passed in a whirlwind. Confusion and celebration converged and made almost manic the festivities that followed. Long after the last guest had gone, I dreamed of sleep while I saw to it in a near trance that all the serving platters had been cleared and cleaned and the hall swept. I was just on my way to bed when I was waylaid by the cook – even more irate than usual when aggravated by exhaustion – and sent with a tray bearing a foul-smelling concoction to the Sovereign's bedchamber.

I went, as bidden, but quaked with terror to do so. The princess greeted me in the doorway and I was for a moment enveloped in the sizzle of her vitality. I kept my eyes to the ground as she took the drink from my tray, but I could not help casting a fast glance in the direction of the Sovereign's bed.

The shrunken old man was back, lost amongst the furs, and I recoiled rather sharply from the sight, just about to flee when again, just as the night before, the princess's voice addressing her father arrested me.

And just as the night before I was ruled, like a tiny animal twitching its whiskers, by instinct. I left the door just slightly ajar and, all thoughts of sleep completely erased from my mind and body, pressed close until I was well placed to see and hear everything.

The Tales of the Home-Bound Daughter

Dearest father, still beloved, though no longer Sovereign.

You have asked and I must answer. I have poured water, lit flames, and drunk tea. The ceremony is complete... The messengers I sent out have returned and I know now how my four brothers fare... My messengers have journeyed far and through unconventional means to bring us

news of my brothers' progress. They have shared their tales amongst themselves and finally with me.

Only, allow me to beg your indulgence, for my messengers must have things in a certain order, and they wish to resume our tale from where we paused it in my previous telling. So it is with that desire that they have delivered your missive first to your south-bound son.

Into the depths, through curtains of fire, over the earth, went the black one, the azure one, the white one, the vermilion one. They rushed headlong bearing my words, your will, upon their folds. Shattering time, reaching backwards, tearing short-cuts through my void, until they converged upon the humble home of a certain merchant from the southern provinces and insinuated themselves into the world there.

There symbols take form, pulse with meaning. Your missive gains earthly presence once more. The white sheet. The black ink. The yellow seal. The destinies forever changed. There, at the door of that house, where my south-bound brother had passed the night in the company of the kind merchant and his wife, a missive is read:

*Heaven has spoken
She who is Sovereign
Bids you to return*

You wish to hear the words that have travelled so far to reach your ears? To know finally and in its entirety the tale that began with my north-bound brother and a portly old traveller in a black cloak? Then let me tarry no longer.

You need not hide your weakness from me, father. Close your eyes. Open your ears to our voices...and listen to the old man continue with his tale of what the merchant had told him...

The Tale of the Old Man and the South-Bound Son

Upon reading the scroll, your brother tore at his hair in agony.

“How can it be?” He bellowed, beyond all good manners in his rage and grief. “When I have journeyed so far? Searched so arduously? When I bear the wisdom of the wisest hermit?” At this he tore the papers in his hand into shreds and hurled them in the air.

The merchant and his wife struggled to contain him but he would not be consoled. Your brother sped about in a thundering rage, going even to the door to seek out the deliverer of the scroll with his eyes swearing violence. But the messenger could not be found. And having exhausted

himself in the fruitless, frantic search your brother at last subsided, nearly in a faint. He sat in silence for some time and then erupted into a bout of laughter. Pardon, but I am afraid they began to think the shock may have driven him mad. But when he finally stopped it was to look upon the merchant and his wife with clear eyes.

“It is no use to weep over what is already lost,” the prince said, “I see that now. If my father wishes to gift his crown to my sister who am I to question him? Fate has chosen and has chosen wisely. I must return to my home and join with my family in the celebrations.”

The merchant was pleased by the prince's wisdom. They finished their meal happily and my brother left the house in good humour, the three people having parted ways as good friends.

The Tale of the West-Bound Son

The father of the bride finished his tale and called for a server to bring him more wine. Your brother sat in silence, his eyes still focused upon the bride and groom sitting at the head of the table. The prince thanked the old man for his information and stood abruptly to leave.

“Then I too must return home,” he said by way of parting and quit the hall in the middle of the festivities.

I thought that my last sight of the prince and soon my attentions had returned fully to the feast. It was later that night, long after I had returned to my home and lay upon my bed, hovering between sleep and wakefulness, that events began to take a dark turn.

First, there was a thunderous knocking at my front door. I arose from my bed, calmed my wife and went to answer it. There before me stood your brother.

But dear prince, imagine my surprise when I saw that he was not in a fit state. His hair had been ruffled and his clothes torn as though he had engaged in some argument or brawl. Before I could even part my lips to ask what had happened, he was dragging me out of my house and into the darkness of the street beyond, his eyes once again alight with an inner madness. I saw then something that stopped the air in my lungs. There, lying across the back of his stallion was a prone figure.

It was the groom, bound and gagged.

You do not believe me? Let me tell you, in that moment I hardly believed what I was seeing. When I shouted with concern, thinking the groom dead for he did not move, your brother subdued me harshly and berated me in a cruel whisper.

But the damage had been done. A pair of guards patrolling the night streets heard my yell and came running to investigate. When they took in the sight before them they rushed at your

brother and dragged him screaming and shouting to the ground. I protested that he was a prince but what he had done could not be ignored. He had kidnapped the groom, meaning to take him back to the Heavenly Sovereign, thinking to convince his father of the error of choosing his sister to inherit the crown.

Dear prince, I am sorry to say your brother has been detained and now waits to stand before a judge for his crime. I visited him once while he was in his cell and he asked me to find his brothers and ask for their aid.

The Traveller, the Widow and the East-Bound Son

The rider fell silent and I offered him a drink as he was much fatigued, first from his long journey and secondly from his tale. He had spoken in a rush, sitting upon the earth and in our surprise at his appearance, neither the prince nor I had even thought to offer him a seat. Now we returned to our senses and offered him both a space on a blanket and food from our bags.

The rider watched the prince as he ate, his eyes filled with worry.

“Now that I have told you, honourable prince,” the rider asked, “what do you think to do?”

The prince seemed much agitated by the rider's news. He seemed unable to remain sitting and stood to pace back and forth before us, his steps kicking up dirt which shimmered like gold dust before our humble fire. We watched him cross in one direction before spinning to retrace his steps going the other way, time and time again in silence. Finally he returned to his blankets and sank onto them.

He suddenly seemed very weary indeed. For a second, he looked again like the beggar I had met while passing alms to the poor.

“It feels as though I have fallen further and further from fate's favour,” the prince said, resting his head in his hands. “Not only have I suffered in a needless quest, I have lost my claim to my father's crown and now stand to lose my beloved brother to the executioner's axe. Ah! Life has played me a cruel hand indeed. I cannot even go to my brother's aid, for I have nothing left to trade for a horse to get me there. I am weary.” He continued to speak in a low voice, as though to himself and we left him for a time with his own thoughts.

When he finally raised his head, I met his eyes. “Good prince,” I said, “take my donkey. Take her and go to your brother's aid. She is not fast but she is strong and sure footed.”

“Please sirs,” the rider interrupted me with a flush of shame, “you are kind to offer your donkey when it is I who should have offered my horse. Take her, prince, she has both speed and strength and she will carry you to your brother's side.”

The prince stared at us in surprise, looking from me to the rider, with amazement in his eyes. “I cannot take from two men who have already been so kind to me.”

“I insist,” said the rider. “Take my horse and when you are done with your duty, send her back to me. I will wait in the town.”

The prince's eyes filled with tears. “What blessed men!” He muttered to himself, then raised his eyes to us. “I shall not lament the journey that has brought me into the company of ones as noble as you. I would face all the horrors of hell if it was to encounter such good and honourable men as you. May the fates remember the kindness you have shown me on this day and may they reward you tenfold in your years to come.”

With that, the prince leapt upon the rider's horse and bidding us a final farewell, galloped hard towards the west.

The Tale of the North-Bound Son

I listened to the traveller's tale with amazement and some disbelief. For so long I had wondered at the fates of my brothers and now, in one evening, I finally knew. More than that, I knew also that my quest had been ended. Yet, it seemed strange to me that a chance encounter with an old man leading a donkey could reveal so much to me.

I gazed at the stooped little man as a myriad of emotions warred for supremacy within me. Concern for my maddened brother to the west, hope for my brother riding from the east to save him, happiness for my sister's accession to the role of Heavenly Sovereign, and though I am loathe to admit it, envy and anger against her for taking the crown from me. I thought of how far I had gone in my own quest and though I had not found what I sought, how tirelessly I had searched.

The old man ate in silence and seemed content to leave me to my thoughts. He seemed to understand that I needed some time to make sense of my feelings, to decide how to proceed. Finally he raised his eyes from his meagre feast of bread and fish and looked upon my face.

“May I ask, prince, what thing you sought?”

When I told him he sighed and smiled. “You set yourself the hardest task, I think, and searched for the most ephemeral of prizes. To search for the princess of dawn herself?” He shook his head in amazement.

I told him that in truth it should have been a relief that I did not have to find her and yet, I felt strange to give up on a mission that had been a part of me for such a time.

“It is always hard,” said the traveller after a moment's consideration, “to close one chapter and begin another. But, honourable prince, if I may say, you are young and have a great life before

you. Perhaps now fate has opened a door to your true destiny? If it is hard for you to abandon this task, perhaps you were meant to complete it. Do what your heart tells you, prince.”

That night as the traveller slept beneath his blankets I thought about what he had said. His words had felt right to me. I had become anxious at the thought of returning home without finishing what I had set out to do. The dream I'd had of that woman in the world of clouds had spoken to a deep part of me, it had felt wrong to abandon it. I knew I had to continue, I was more determined than ever to find her.

So the next morning I gifted the traveller with my bag of gold, thanking him for his kindness to my brother to the west and for his tales about my other brothers and bade him farewell.

I continued on my journey north. Slowly the weather began to change for the worse. What started as a weak breeze was soon a harrowing gale. My face was lashed with hail and ice, I lost the feeling in my hands. The terrain became smooth, cloaked in snow.

I had not planned to journey so far north and I was ill prepared for what awaited me there. I slept one night in a cavern to escape the frigid winds, huddled deep within the womb of the mountain. I made, after much struggle, a small fire which did little to keep me warm and spent the night shivering beneath my furs. I thought that this night might be my last. The tips of my fingers and my toes had been burned black by the cold. I fell into a fitful sleep.

That night I dreamt of her again, my princess of the dawn.

I awoke again to darkness, there was little light to be enjoyed as far north as I had gone at this time of year.

I packed my few belongings and set out again upon my horse. Before long, the animal had collapsed and I was forced to go forward on foot. I walked far before I turned for a moment to look back the way I had come. My own footprints trailed behind me out into the distance. I could no longer see the body of my horse.

I knew there would be no going back, no making it home to my brothers, my sister, my father. I bade them all farewell in my heart, wished them happiness, and continued on my journey. My legs sank into the snow up to the knees. I don't know how long had passed but soon I was struggling with the snow building up to my thighs.

Before me, the mountain I had been heading towards rose like a slumbering giant from the sea of white. Its curves were carved of jagged black peaks dusted white.

I stared.

What I had taken in my delirious state to be a glimmer of ice upon the black rock face was, now as I neared, revealed to be a magnificent waterfall frozen in the act of tumbling from a high peak. It towered before me.

I thought it would be the last thing my eyes would behold and I was grateful to witness such beauty. My eyes filled with tears just as the sun began to rise for its brief life in the brittle north.

The beauty swept through me and I stopped fighting, stopped trying to move forward. I stood, buried nearly to the waist in the snow drift, watching the sun glinting off the towering frozen waterfall.

Suddenly, I saw her.

My princess of the dawn. Reflected in the brilliant colours that bled when sun met ice. She stood before me, as towering as the waterfall.

Our eyes met.

The breath left my lungs.

“...To have seen you...” I gasped the words past dry cracked lips.

I saw her smile and then I saw no more.

I awoke in a world of clouds. For a moment I thought I dreamed, but there she was before me. Kneeling at my side with her hand upon my brow.

When I tried to speak she forestalled me.

“Prince,” she said, “you have travelled far to find me. And I have waited long for you.”

I asked her where she had taken me and she confessed that she had drawn me into her world, within the frozen waterfall. What I had taken, in my dreams, to be clouds were in fact sun-warmed snow drifts.

I passed many days in her company, growing to admire her more with each moment. She would leave me only at dawn to welcome the day and awake the world with her gentle kiss. The rest of the day was ours. And we passed them well. She was the most glorious company, full of the joyousness of the time she represented.

Finally, one day as we lay watching the world beyond the frozen waterfall, she took my hand.

“You must leave me and go to your family,” she said.

I tried to protest but she would not hear me.

“They will worry for you,” she pressed. “Go to them, but come back to me. I will be waiting here.”

My heart lifted at her words, I had worried that she meant to banish me completely.

She gifted me with a stallion of snow and clouds and bade me return to her quickly.

So now I have returned to tell my father what has happened to me. To tell him that I have found the place I wish to stay and a woman who I love more than life itself.

The Tales of the Home-Bound Daughter

And so dearest father, even now your north-bound son races to be at your side. To share with you his most wonderful news. Even now his heart, overflowing with love, races to be near you. Even now his mind, adrift in hope, races with thoughts of you. He bends low over his stallion. There is urgency in every weary crease of his visage.

Perhaps he feels what we both feel now. That time is racing too. Flying past, bleeding from your pores.

Your hand in mine. I will walk with you into the darkness. I will hold your hand until you are ready to let go.

Where are you now on your journey? Are you yet a speck in a gaping void? An anchor descending into the murky depths?

It is all to do with air. That which is everything and nothing. Too much or too little. The things you took for granted. Being the centre. Filling your lungs. The sun, your sons. The creak of your bones, the glide of your silk robe, the earth beneath your slippers – your earth. Cool pebbles, smooth sand, rich soil, the ebb and flow of our everyday little customs. All that clings to you like a babe at a teat. A steady stream of give and take, need and fulfilment. The needed and the needy. Changing faces like an actor on the stage. Which are you now, father?

Eyes bulging, fingers grasping, skin like paper. Hoarding air in your lungs with the terror of a miser. The palsied dance of the needy. The sudden wakefulness of one who has too long been asleep. I recognise the signs, this is the dominion of the gaping void. You have only now learned that you are nothing. To shrink so violently, to retract so savagely, can shatter the unprepared. Feel my hand? I will hold you together to the last. Only feel it. Do not fear it. It must go through you like a blade. Work it through. And out the other end. You are nothing. Do you see? Is it not wonderful? You are nothing. And so, you are free to be anything.

Your eyes... When I was little they were so vivid in colour, bright. Now clouds have gathered there. They pelt your cheeks with rain. Father, I will wipe your tears, and mine as well, and lead you through.

Your eyes... I can see the waves frothing up over you, reflected in their depths. Midnight blue, streaked with black and green, capped with white, rolling in its belly terrible and terrific shapes and shadows.

Drip...

...drop...

...drip...

...drop...

...drip...

...drop...

The icy dots exploding on your forehead. The first, tremulous sway of the inevitable deluge. Silence gives way to a rushing, reverberating, roar of sound. Did you fill your lungs with one last panicked gulp of air? It will be of no use to you, I'm afraid. The shuddering force of the cascading wave breaking over you will squeeze the breath from your innards until it erupts from your lips in a stream of bubbles and bursts over the surface. Waiting now for instinct to defeat self-preservation. The burning within blossoming outwards like a chrysanthemum. Still fingers, claw-like, curved. Crooked. Stretched out, back arched, toes out – as though stance alone could save you now.

Relax your fingers. Allow them to mould to mine. Loosen your muscles, unlock your bones. You are only sinking. Falling is an illusion here. There is no ground rushing up to shatter you like glass, to burst you like a grape and turn you inside out. There is only stillness and silence and the gentle glide of a farewell caress. This is the moment in which you learn to let go. Again nothing.

It is all to do with air. Out it goes. And you are as light as...

Here, father. See my hands? With my left, I cradle and with my right I slice the veil of illusion with the blade of wisdom.

Shall we sigh the last together?

...*Absolute*...

An emptiness of significance.

Remember, father, to seek me there in the void.

...

One? No. Two. No. Three? No. Four. No. Five? Six...

Yes. The sixth will do...

For the other who is lonely in the midst of a crowd. For one that is lowly in the midst of the great. For one who dreams but can not imagine. Who is wise and yet, a coward still. Who can fly and does not know it. For the one who hides and listens and deceives only himself...

For the little boy hearing my voice and thinking to flee –

... Awareness...

The Story of *The Spirit Pacification* and its Captain

You can imagine, I am sure, how quickly my skin shrivelled up over my bones. How hard my heart fell to the pits of my belly. I did not even move. Only stood and waited as the door was pulled

slowly inwards.

The princess stood before me, looming tall as always, and my senses were engulfed by her, my sight filled with her form.

She crooked a finger, a slashing horizontal gesture. I stepped forward and the door slid shut behind me. Palm up and that finger cut skywards, her tapered nail like an arrow aimed between her eyes.

Vivid eyes. Powerful eyes. All seeing eyes. Deep-reaching eyes that stripped the soul. She held me in her thrall. And that mountain avalanche of a voice that rolled now to a low rumble. “Where will your will lead you, little boy?”

Eyes like gateways and I saw myself in them. For the first time not a peasant. Not poor. Not powerless. Not defined by my lack. A future of my choosing. An entire world at my disposal. Danger, yes. But bliss, too, surely? Difference, at least. A chance at something...*else*. To not be compelled purely by the accidents of circumstance. To choose...

I saw myself then in a flash. Outdoors, where now I was bound to the stuffy kitchens, in fresh wild air. Sea air. Clashing winds. The creaking wood, the flapping sails, the rise and fall of a great vessel and the ecstatic clinging of its crew.

“I see,” she said and I have no doubt that she truly had. “Then your will has led you to the unknown, just as mine once did so long ago. Sleep now, little boy. Tomorrow, your life begins anew.”

I do not remember making my way back to the servants' quarters but I awoke at dawn to the announcement that everything had been prepared for my departure. The cook, in a foul sulk at having to pack my provisions, glared at me with suspicious eyes as I dressed and barked out directions as to where I was to go and who I was to meet.

It was only then, as the door slammed shut behind me with unnatural violence, that I realised I was really leaving. Already the pattern of my life had changed. I was heading out into the unknown and I could not help but be heartened. I left the Palace on a mule with only the clothes on my back and a small satchel of food, but I dreamt the entire journey of the glorious wonders I would soon be experiencing.

It took many days of travel to reach the sea and I went immediately to the ship we sit in now. The captain greeted me with kindness but told me that I would not be given any favours as a result of my royal recommendation.

“You will work and be treated just as the rest of my men,” the captain informed me. “Any favour you gain will be of your own making.”

If he had thought to frighten me, I am afraid he failed. I was used to hard work and indeed I

hungered to prove myself to a man such as he. I wanted to see where my wits could lead me, considering the wonderful opportunity I had been given.

I set to work aboard the ship immediately, introducing myself to the crew, who treated me (as every tight knit group does a newcomer) with caution, and settled to my work. For the first week, I scrubbed the decks every day with a rough brush that chapped and brittled my hands. The second, I was trained on how to set the sails and tie the ropes.

Time passed as though in a dream. *The Spirit Pacification* was a merchant ship and it journeyed across the oceans from one splendid land to another. I did not have time to admire the sights that passed. I bent, single mindedly, to any work I had been assigned. I kept to myself mostly, not wasting time in chatting and drinking with the other men and for their part they left me be. For the first month I was not invited to alight when we made port. I stayed aboard the ship, never complaining though I had to bite back the resentment, and saw to my work.

Slowly, I noticed things had begun to change. The men, over time, began to refer to me by name, as opposed to simply beckoning me forward with a shout or a flick of the wrist. They would ask me to do the menial tasks less and less and began to trust me to complete more difficult duties. The night they invited me to join them for dinner, I knew I had been accepted as one of them. The next port we made, the captain himself called me forward to disembark with the crew.

The port town dazzled my senses, the sights, sounds and smells were unlike any I had ever encountered. The exotic faces, the strange and wonderful produce all gladdened my heart. But too soon I had to tear myself away and return to my chores. The captain was tasked with selling the food stuffs we had picked up in the last port and called me forward to unload the barrels and take them to the merchant who would buy them. I was completing my work when I happened to overhear the merchant quoting an unfair price to my captain. Now, years of working as a farmer, of taking my own produce to market had taught me the fair value of food. I realized that the merchant was trying to cheat my captain, and though there was a part of me that thought it best not to interfere and that I risked the wrath of my captain should I interrupt, I could not resist doing so.

“Good sir,” I addressed the merchant, ignoring the hard eyes the captain turned in my direction, “the food we have brought before you is of an excellent quality. While the price you have offered us is generous, I am afraid it does not do our produce justice. We can sell them to another merchant for twice that much.”

The merchant glared down at me before addressing my captain. “Who is this ship hand who thinks he can speak to me like this? Captain, does he speak for you? If so, I beg you to deal with another merchant and not waste my time.”

“Let us go, Captain,” I began to turn away, daring to gesture at my captain to follow.

My captain looked ready to bellow his rage at my interference. But just as I thought he was readying to strike me down for my impudence, the merchant called us back in a grudging voice. The merchant nearly threw the money into my captain's hands, his eyes boring angrily into mine.

As we walked away, my captain began to smile, then to laugh uproariously. "I had not thought to gain a ship hand and a merchant at that." He shook my hand. "You have doubled my profits and from today onwards you will accompany me in all my sales."

My life improved greatly from that day on. The extra profits gained from my dealings with the merchant meant that the captain was able to buy more food and provisions for the crew. Which in turn gained me favour with the men aboard the ship. Time passed quickly, and before long our ship became well known for transporting only the best goods and making the best trades. There was not a merchant on any shore who did not know of our reputation. None tried to cheat us.

When the captain retired, he gave me the ship for my services to him. By that time I had grown older and wiser. I knew to be grateful for his gift, but I was also aware that I had earned it.

I have seen much of the world. I have met all varieties of people. I have met honourable men and cruel ones, fair ones and those with crooked schemes forever in their hearts. I have passed more of my life aboard my ship than upon the land. At first the adventures were wondrous and many. After a time, they became commonplace.

Yet, no matter where I have been, or what I have seen, the memory of the princess who became Heavenly Sovereign has always blazed brightest in my mind.

For the little boy, she said so long ago, awareness. And I had misunderstood her. Or at least only understood her part way. You see, it is not enough to desire a thing. One must know *why* the thing is desired. Otherwise we are flailing blind, grasping through the darkness at everything, anything. Perhaps, the wrong thing. We must be aware of ourselves fully. Always. It is not adventure that makes a person worthy, but rather the way in which it is greeted. To dream for something different just for the sake of change is to ignore the glories before us. Good and bad exist both here and there. We cannot escape from what life has destined for us. We must not even try. Instead, we must face whatever we are dealt with all the honour within us. I thought to find happiness away from everything I had ever known, but I have yet to do so. You see, Absence, it is no good to seek happiness without, if you do not have it within.

The Tale of the Lady in Blue

The lanterns in his cabin cast creeping shadows as he finished his tale. The feast the crew had prepared sat before us, forgotten.

“You have a choice,” he said to me. “The same winds that brought you here can bear you back to your family. Or you can remain here with me.”

I had listened to his tale in respectful silence, but too often wisdom is lost on the young and impetuous. I thought of my mother, my little home upon the cliff's edge and the creaking branches of my cherry tree.

I compared the things I had known to the adventures that awaited me should I remain at this captain's side. They did not compare. For, I thought, how could I be happy in a world that had sought to restrain me? With a mother who could never understand the hunger that twirled my stomach into knots and made my life impossible to endure?

“I choose you.”

Foolish words? Reckless deed?

Perhaps.

The captain's eyes closed but not before I caught sight of the sadness writ within them. When he opened them once more, they seemed to glow with an inner fire.

“So be it then.” The tone with which he uttered those words caused a strange foreboding to coil to life within me.

I ignored it. It was only my mother's fear budding within me like a disease. I would never succumb to it. Just as I had never succumbed to her.

Let me say this, the captain never gave me cause to regret the choice I had made that day. He was a good and kind companion and over the years, a loyal and caring lover. We made our lives there aboard that great creaking ship. He took me to places the likes of which I had never dreamed. We laughed in markets rife with colour and sound and loved upon sheets which glistened like satin and carried with them stories from far-flung lands.

I was happy then. I thought less and less of my mother with her empty outstretched hands. Then there came a time when I did not think about her at all.

As the seasons passed I began to grow big with child. But an ill wind blew and I could not be as pleased as my husband, the kind captain. I knew that he had at last found his happiness, but I had a strange fear of the child that grew within me. I knew she would be a girl and I passed day and night with my hand over my belly, feeling the roil of the great ship beneath me, yearning to feel the easy happiness that I had seen upon the faces of the mothers in the port towns we visited. Those women had carried the glow of welcome. I felt the dejection of a farewell. I could not understand why.

That night I dreamt of my mother again and I heard the bells toll their one hundred eight rings of defilement. I awoke in a sweat and with the labour pains already upon me.

I gave birth, the next day, to a beautiful little girl. I held her, but awkwardly, for I knew she was not mine to keep. I had no right to her. She looked upon me as a stranger.

As my husband slept I carried the baby from my cabin and set her within a basket. I walked upon the wet deck of the ship and watched the water roiling far below with the basket in my hands. It took me moments to secure the basket's handles with a length of rope, to lower the basket into the embrace of the ocean, to release the rope and watch the basket float away.

The baby girl within the basket upon the sea. I watched her being borne far from my reach.

I had torn my mother from her child and now fate had demanded that I make up for my theft.

I would find the baby again when I was worthy of her.

The Girl Who Awoke

The rising sun tinges the woman in crimson. Her smile is sad but it turns hopeful as she watches the girl thoughtfully.

“Do you know me?” The woman asks the girl. Her eyes are pleading.

The girl does not need to answer. The woman sees her answer before she can speak it.

The woman rises from the table, the cobalt silk of her robe swirling like the undulations that so long ago carried her child from her arms. She crosses the room to the green door and throws it wide, gesturing the girl to her side.

“I may not have given you the answers your heart desires,” the woman says, “but I can point you on your way.”

From the green door, a path stretches out between two tangled and impenetrable walls of reeds and towering trees.

“Follow the path and open your heart.”

The girl steps out onto the sunlit path. The warmth permeates her naked body. She stands uncertainly upon the path, feeling the smooth cool dirt beneath her feet.

The woman smiles. “Advance,” she says and stands, watching the girl walk away down the path, with her hands clasped over her heart. Her smile dissolves into agony as the girl disappears from view.

The girl follows the path, her heart beating with a strange intensity of emotion. She feels that something awaits her upon this journey. She walks though she does not know to where. She rushes though she does not know why. She encounters no gates, the path before her unwinds into the distance, unobstructed. When she pauses uncertainly and gazes behind her, the woman and her

cottage are no longer visible. So she continues forward.

And she is rewarded.

Before her, there is a glint of light upon the ground. It blinds her briefly but she bends to search the dirt. She brushes the rich soil away and draws in a breath.

A golden chain emerges and when she lifts it, the dirt falls away to reveal an ornate key. The girl kneels on the path, absently brushing the dirt away from the key and its chain. She unlatches the chain to secure it around her neck.

For a second she is aware of the key settling between her breasts and then in a whirl of movement she has disappeared from the path outside the woman's cottage and reappeared in her own cottage.

She stands with her heart pounding, turns a full circle.

Her green door is open.

She follows her rock strewn path to the gate. The key lifts itself from her chest, drawing her forward with the chain towards the tiny lock at the centre of the tall structure obscuring her path.

The key slots itself into the lock and turns. It slips from the lock as the doors begin to swing open.

The girl walks through the gates into the darkness beyond. The great doors begin to creak shut behind her. She stands, shivering in the complete darkness until the gates clang together, sealing her in.

For a count of two heartbeats she stands in the darkness.

There is a flare of light to her right. And then another. And another. Slowly little pinpoints of flame blaze to life all around her, until she stands in the centre of a gentle ethereal glow. The lights shimmer out of the darkness, revealing a living room decorated in dark woods and plush fabrics. The candles which birth the light are set all about the room. There is a sharp scratching sound as the arm of a record player settles onto a spinning vinyl. A gentle voice begins to croon into the silence:

*Wie treu sind deine Blätter!
Du grunst nicht nur zur Sommerzeit,
Nein, auch im Winter, wenn es schneit.*

To her right, drapes billow inwards before a wall of French windows. The girl walks towards them and peeks outside. The silence and peace of indoors contrasts sharply with the activity taking place outside. Shadowy forms flit back and forth before her, around a blazing bonfire, beside a beautiful tree with its rounded head heavy with gold and silver ornaments. She can smell the

smokey tang carried on the breeze from the fire outside, accented with the gentle warmth of honey and butter. A fierce looking beast stalks among the people, its black fur threaded with the silver of old age.

The sights bring tears to the girl's eyes. She turns back to the room and walks upon the plush cream carpet. There is a fireplace at the right of the room, at the heart of a wall set with glossy black stones. The candle's flames dance their echoes within each of the carved obsidian shapes. She runs her hands over the stones, across the crystal ornaments and aged leather-bound books stacked carefully by height in the bookshelf. She eases herself finally into one of the armchairs. Its extravagant yellow and brown cloth are soft on her skin. She curls her feet under her.

The music continues to play.

She is aware of a feeling of utter happiness. The promise of unopened packages. The memory of a child's watch with a robot face and thick plastic armbands. Of warm embraces, her head cushioned on a full breast while fingers run over her hair. The taste of fire-charred corn and fingers secretly licked clean. She feels that she belongs here, like a jigsaw piece that has been slotted into its assigned space. She closes her eyes and surrenders herself to the warmth of the room, the warmth of her feelings. Her heart overflows.

II. Justice

There are some things so beautiful they take your breath away. Life is like that sometimes. It is sublime beyond our imaginings. The world can be so full of wonder. A mist hovering at sunrise over an abandoned field, burning away gently under the sun's rays. A jagged coastline with a wild ocean breaking itself against the rocky shore. A tumbling avalanche of snow in the Arctic falling into still blue waters as overhead the sky swirls in strips and streams of emerald green. The sight of an old couple holding hands while huddled under a rain-soaked umbrella. A child leaping high from a descending swing. For a time I knew only these things. My life was a series of moments worthy of a string quartet's soaring strains or the wild splashes of oil upon a canvas. I was suspended in a world of light and shadow, that which was not good I did not see. The walls that encircled me were stone bricks, they held in all I held dear. I collected friends within the walls and would toss them fire-grilled meat as the eagles circled above. They would swoop down to share the bounty then crest away upon a draft with wide-spread wings. I would spend my days scaling the walls with no desire to escape. She warned me I would be giving some burglars ideas. Burglars did not exist for me. Even those who left in the dead of night did so by climbing a ladder so as not to leave the gates open, their strange escape hovering like a question mark over our untouched valuables. My desires were few, sometimes to water the plants until the rich smell of dirt hovered in the air, to climb the water tower to tend my secret nest of rescued rats, to feed the stray dogs አንጃራ. I was so confident then, of myself, of the world around me. The future seemed to seethe with promise, unfurling before me in the footsteps of my elders. Happiness though is a strange ephemeral thing. It is too often the stuff of memories. Of images, people and ideas wiped clean of blemishes and studied over again with a dream-like filter. These are the things I was sure I would never tell you. The things I thought you could do without. But on reflection, Her care was my downfall. Do you know what awaits a little girl who does not see things as they are when she finally travels beyond the stone bricks? She sees too much, understands too little. She loses her laughter and her eyes no longer look into the heart of things, they skim over the world to settle on the pavement. So it is better to know, I think. Better to know that for every sunrise there is a sunset. For each thing of beauty lurks a shadow of despair. There are people who have nothing. Let this truth seep into your soul. I am not speaking of walls to guard them or jewels to adorn them. There are children who do not know the warmth of their parents' love, who know neither the gentle embrace nor the twinkling glances. There are those who go to bed hungry, even for more than food and drink to sustain them. There are those who use their time on earth to do horrible things. There are people so twisted with hurt and despair, with shame and hopelessness that they would do the most horrid things to others. But even more

insidious are those who hover in between the two worlds. Who show great kindness in one instance and blinding cruelty the next. The ones who are careless with their words, who wound those they encounter. And sometimes, these people do not lurk like monsters somewhere beyond our eyesight, but rather they are facets of those who live and love amongst us. Do my words make you wary? Do you see two sides to everything now? Does the sight of beauty make you aware of the ugliness? Then you will be strong for it. Be aware that life can be disappointment and pain just as easily as it can be success and happiness. But perhaps this is the very glory of it? I have yet to be sure. If I have learned anything it is to laugh more. It will carry you through all of what life will set before you. In my memories and till this day She tells me to be grateful. That is Her secret, to remember all the good things. They have been many but they are not all. I wonder at Her ability to not see what is before Her. She can be blind when it is best that She does not see. She tells me I have always been cursed with too clear a vision. A strange look, a censuring word, an unexpected tone – I observed them all. Her power is opposite and exponentially stronger. She can rewrite what has passed, re-imagine what is taking place. Yet we are not so different, She and I. Both afraid to be hurt, both gazing out at the world around us with a sad sense of betrayal. I would want different for you. So I will reach deep within myself and gather my hurt. I will cast it out into the heavens to disperse upon the winds. I will build myself up upon Her shoulders and heft you higher still. Raise your eyes above the clouds. Things align there, the horizon balances and it will steady your disposition. Strengthen your resolve. You will need these things. As heroines always must.

The Girl Who Awoke

A girl awakes, but this time she remembers.

A new world unfurls before her, seeps into her pores, is woven into the tapestry of her history. The night before swirls in her memory. The lady in blue and her wonderful tales, but more than even that, the key that unlocked the gate that stood, a towering barrier upon her path. She feels the key, warmed from her skin, still nestled between her breasts. She lies upon her bed and looks at the lake from the sunlit square that is the window.

She knows what her heart is asking of her, but for some strange reason even she cannot fathom, she hesitates to obey. She is almost afraid of the hope, the happiness that builds in her chest at the thought of what the key reveals. She had locked the gate carefully behind her, hiding away the pinpoints of light and the gentle lilt of music. Now her heart begs her to return, to view again the wonders beyond that dry forbidding gate.

Finally, she obeys it. She leaves her warm bed, crosses the house, opens the green door,

walks down the path, unlocks and throws open the gate.

One by one the pin-points of light flare to life within. The music begins and outside the shadowy forms cross to and fro.

The time the girl spends in the magical space fuels her desire to know what is beyond it. She circles the room, touching everything. Textures shimmer against her seeking palms. Velvet, glass, stone.

She follows the walls and beyond the fireplace set amongst the black stones, past the carved mahogany dining table she finds another door. It is secured with a little latch. She opens it and it swings outwards.

The girl steps through the door and emerges onto a path cutting its way between towering trees. It is sister to the one beyond her cottage's green door. She follows it, stepping from the evening of the candle-lit room and out into the daylight.

She walks upon the pebbled road and follows the winding pathway with her hands grazing over the rough wood and tangled branches that run alongside it.

She turns a corner and gasps.

Another gate towers in her path.

She slaps her hands against it. This is her first taste of despair.

She goes back the way she came, tracing her own footsteps back down the path, through the shadowy room, down another path and back to her cottage.

She crosses to the blue door, at a loss, and opens the door to sit down upon the first stone steps with her feet dipped into the lake. Her eyes track the sun's journey across the sky.

Her time means nothing. It comes and goes, unmarked. She waits.

Soon she sees what she had hoped she would see. An unremarkable bottle floating across the lake towards her. She watches its rolling movements in amazement, noticing again how the lake does not move beneath it. The bottle makes its way towards her as though blown by some divine providence.

The girl walks down the steps to meet it, eager. The glass is cold against her hands. She pulls out the cork and upends the bottle, pulls free the scroll within.

“Who are you?” The world asks.

Perhaps I can answer.

Be ready when I send for you.

It is an exact replica of the first. The girl is confused but she settles down to wait. Later that

day, as the sun sets over the horizon, she sees again the spot of light growing in the distance. Soon the little boat reaches her cottage steps and, once she is settled aboard, is spinning around to glide across the glassy surface of the lake. This time the boat steers west and after a long journey it finally approaches a cottage with a woman standing before it in a silk robe of sunflower yellow.

The woman in yellow greets the girl with a warm smile, takes her hand and leads her up the steps and into the cottage. Once the girl is settled cross-legged before a dying fireplace the woman settles beside her and stares deep into the flickering embers.

“I am glad you have come,” the woman says finally, turning her eyes back to the girl. Her voice has a low rumbling quality, like the echo of an avalanche. “Maybe you have been lonely? I have been lonely too.” The fading light and last flickering spark reflect in her eyes as the woman gazes back into the fire.

The Tale of the Lady in Yellow

But loneliness is the price we pay for the things we have done. Life is a scale held aloft in the hands of the gods. It teeters one way then the other. It is all chance. What matters is not which way the scale tips, but how you conduct yourself. Should you fail to be noble, the penalty is deep.

I know this because I have learnt it through experience. Now I pay the price for my sins.

I was born in a land of snow and frost. My house had sheltered four generations of my family. My great grandfather split the wood that framed our walls with his own bare hands. The house stood in the centre of a vast and barren field. At the heart of winter it would all be buried under snow, the house a little bump in a blanket of white. In the distance, tree branches splayed black against the clear blue sky, creaking beneath their heavy loads of ice. My father, a fisherman, was almost never home. My mother and my siblings, I was the eldest of four, passed most of the year alone. We made what living we could from the earth but it was little and life was hard. But it was also savagely beautiful. I would sleep to the song of the wolves upon the hills.

Day to day, our lives were constant, with little variation. But the beauty of our world was shaded by my cruel spirit. Even as a child I resented our poverty. Hated the struggle of the everyday. I longed to live the life of grandeur that the heroes and heroines in my mother's night-time stories enjoyed. I dreamt almost every night that I would leave the life I knew behind. Mind, it was not that I did not love my family, far from it, but the love I felt for them was laden with resentment. I hated them for the role they had cast me in, and more than even that, for the responsibilities they foisted on me as the eldest child. I did not see then how twisted my heart was, only now do I realise my folly. Too late, when the judgement had already been made. I was finally called to task for my

soulessness one strange night in the heart of winter while my father was away at sea.

We rarely had visitors, but that night as my family gathered in the kitchen, the cooking fires blazing between us, we heard a knock upon our door. My mother started, her knife poised in mid-air above the bread she had been slicing. She lowered the knife slowly as a second resounding knock followed. She looked up at me while she beckoned the other children back into the bedroom where we all slept tucked together like fish on a grill. I went immediately to get my father's rifle from behind the tapestry, responding to my mother's silent command. I poised, kneeling behind the kitchen table and watched her brush her hands on her apron before she went to the door.

She asked who demanded entrance into her home.

A robust female voice answered. "I am the Golden One and I mean you no harm, I swear it on the gods."

My mother asked what she wanted.

"I seek kindness. I am a stranger in this area without provisions to survive. I have lost my brothers and ask to spend the night in your home."

My mother invoked the word, the highest dishonour would befall the one who dared to betray it, and the stranger outside answered her vow. My mother signalled to me to move and I quickly returned the rifle to its hiding place, while she opened the door hurriedly and let the stranger into our home.

The Golden One was forced to bow her head to enter through our doorway, so tall was she. Her name, at first, seemed not to suit her. For she towered, with hair and clothing black as night and expression as grim as death. Her build was that of a monstrous beast, honed in battle. Her chest spanned wide like a barrel and her thighs were like sculpted stone columns. She wore rough fur boots and coat. A great scabbard swung low from her lean hips. A large falcon glared down at us from upon its perch on one broad shoulder. Its sharp beak was as threatening as the long black talons that gripped its mistress's coat.

Finally, we were all seated with our food before us and the Golden One had set upon her food like a ravenous beast, cleaning her plate in seconds and allowing my foolishly generous mother to refill it. For my part, I am ashamed to say that I was angry that our guest could be so obtuse. It was good and proper that my mother would offer, but the Golden One should have known better than to accept. The second helping the warrior ate without thought would have been our food for the next night. We were not wealthy and in the heart of winter, food was scarce enough as it was.

Soon, however, my thoughts were distracted my another knock on the door. This time our guest went to the door on my mother's behalf, warming me a little to her, even as I moved closer to the tapestry just in case our second guest were not as pleasant as our first.

But whomever responded to the Golden One's call must have been known to her, for she threw open the door with a happy exclamation.

The Golden One spoke to the four men as they stood outside. They talked in low, urgent voices. Finally the Golden One turned to my mother and explained that the new arrivals were her brothers and asked if they too may enter. I was beginning to worry that they would eat us out of house and home when the warrior added that the men came with provisions of their own and that they would gladly share them with us, if we would be so good as to allow them entrance.

The men made the vow to my mother in response to her request and she allowed them to enter.

When they entered it struck me that while the warriors had some similarities between them, they were also strikingly different. While they all shared the same immense height and similar manners of dress as the Golden One, they were differently coloured.

The men introduced themselves. The one with the yellow beard and hair was the Silver One; with red: the Bronze One; with white: the Heroic One; and with brown: the Iron One. Each bowed to us in turn and I could not help but notice that the Silver One's eyes lingered upon me as he spoke.

They all sat at our table, forcing my siblings and me to retreat to the bedroom and strain to hear while kneeling quietly on the mattress.

As the night began to settle all around us the warriors, relaxed by food and drink and good company, began to speak of the adventure that had led them to our house. One by one, they began to tell my mother their tales.

Although their presence had initially unsettled me, the Golden One's voice (as she began to speak first) soothed me. And then, as I listened, peering surreptitiously across the room at her shadowy face in the firelight, I began to think that the discomfort had been worth the company.

“Let me begin,” said the Golden One, “by saying that these men and I are not joined by blood. We are siblings of the sword. A clan bound by the irrefutable goodness of honourable thought and deed. United, not by virtue of birthright but rather by virtue itself.”

The Golden One

I am known as the Golden One but it was not always so.

I was born into a prosperous family in a country beset by troubles. It was a land constantly at war with its neighbours, one troubled by poverty and pride alike.

The day my mother birthed me the moon passed through the earth's shadow and bathed us all in blackness. I was told later that the darkness must have seeped into me at that moment, for my

parents, unlike me, were fair.

My father being privy to the King's ear on matters of court and state, I was trained early in the dual arts of war and peace. The two things that span all of life's experiences. In the mornings I would sharpen swords and cleave targets with the other warriors and by evening I would be trading good humour and sipping wine with ladies garbed in the richest velvets and lace. In battle, I displayed a natural talent for the sword; in love, for amorous intrigues.

I especially enjoyed working with the falcons. The proud bird's elegant flight, the feel of its talons digging through the leather upon my forearms, were all wonderful to me. I took to riding out early before the kingdom had awakened with a falcon perched on my arm. The path winding up the stark jagged mountains was an arrow leading me towards happiness. I would unleash the falcon while my horse perched on a mountain tip beneath me, with the clouds beneath us. I would watch the sun's rays breaking up through the clouds while the falcon screeched and dove deep into the valley below. As time passed I took to starting out earlier and venturing out even further. I took to riding through the night, staying out in the wilderness, roasting a rabbit my falcon had snared for my repast and building shelters to shield us from the winds.

The silence appealed to me, the only noises being the snap of a twig in the flames or the rustle of leaves in the darkness. Every now and then an animal would call out. No human voices, none of the sounds of bustling activity and busy life, only the slow revolutions of our world, the steady swing of mother nature's pendulum. I began to loathe human company, the times I spent at home began to build into a special kind of torture for me. The gentlemen of the court, who had held such a fascination for me such a short time before, now seemed to symbolise the very definition of boredom. My parents soon noticed my reticence but their company was, by then, as bothersome to me as everyone else's.

Finally one day I rode out and did not think to return. I went forth for many days, the weather was fine and my journey was untroubled. I passed the day in riding slowly with the falcon soaring overhead, or galloping across flower-choked fields, their blossoms kicked into the air like clouds in our wake. I passed the nights cutting strips of fresh meat for my bird to grasp between its talons and tear at with its beak before eating my own share. I would lie back on my blankets with the great weight of the star-encrusted sky pressing down upon me.

As I lay, just so, on one particular night, hovering between sleep and wakefulness, I heard a soft whisper of sound. It was music, a gentle ethereal melody unfurling itself through the trees to stream into my ear. I rose up onto my elbows, straining towards the sound. It seemed to withdraw from me, hovering just beyond my reach.

So, I followed it.

A dense fog had stolen in amongst the trees and the slow undulating melody seived through it. I followed, my hands reaching from tree to tree, the feel of the rough bark grounding me. The music led me through the woods, out into a stark open field and across. I halted my next step in mid air, realising just in time that I had been about to step out into empty space. The music continued, hovering over the fall that dipped deep into the earth at the bottom of a dangerous rock-strewn slope. It beckoned me and I could not resist it. I stepped forward and crashed down into the valley below. Rocks and branches cut and slashed at me as I tumbled, rendering me almost unconscious by the time I rolled to a stop.

The music had stopped. The pain settled on me in an instant, nearly robbing me of my breath with its sudden intensity.

As I lay with my head spinning with agony, my soul crying out for the music to return to me, I thought dazedly that I heard someone's quiet approach.

“She has heard us. She has answered our call. Bring her.”

I heard a voice speaking in a whisper from somewhere beyond my line of sight. I was drawn to it as I had been to the music. The pain overwhelmed me as I strained to face the speaker and the shadows overtook me.

When I came to, I was lying beside a fire with a cool breeze wafting the music through the air. I opened my eyes and realised that I was lying on a bed of furs in an open area surrounding by walls. A courtyard. I must have moved, for immediately I heard several sets of approaching footsteps. A shadow fell across me as the men stood, circling my reclining form. I looked up at their down-bent faces but could not make out any of their features as all the men were wearing hoods and cloaks.

“Calm yourself,” one of them said, “you are amongst friends. We called forth for a brave soul and you have answered us.”

The men explained to me that they were comrades in arms. United, not by blood, but by a duty greater and more noble than any other on earth. They were known as The Order of Balance. Where there was injustice, they would gather to right its wrongs. The Order, however, was a special sect, for it was in possession of an object of immense power. A certain music box, so engendered with magic, that it could sense the bravest and most honourable of people and call them to it. This was how The Order refilled its ranks. The music chose its members from far and wide and called them to the temple where they gathered in secret.

“Your power is silence,” they said. “In silence you will always find the answers you seek, and the powers to fight against the evils of life. It has brought you to us and it will take you as far as you wish to go.”

It was in The Order's temple that, after many months of blissful solitude, I met my Silver brother.

The Silver One

I was born in a warm land by the sea. I grew up upon the frothing waves of my idyllic home. I would dive beneath the azure ripples and disappear within the murky depths. I could snare a fish with a bare fist and hurl it, still wriggling to be free, upon the white sandy shore. I would swim, weaving amidst the merchant's boats and entangled nets. I would float, with the urge to breathe clawing at my burning throat within the trailing weeds at the bottom of the ocean. Sometimes I would imagine I was entangled in them and the thought of remaining there forever frightened and pleased me all at once.

As a boy I spent much of my time running around the coast with my friends. I was an only child and thus the apple of my mother's eye, but there was only so much the poor woman could do to shelter me from danger. Especially when my greatest enemy shared our home and commanded our lives.

My mother always told me that when I was born my father had been away at sea. A storm had raged and she thought those very waves must have washed over my spirit, for it seemed that they had washed all the colour from me. While my parents were dark, you see, I was very fair.

My mother was a woman of great honour and supreme sadness. She could never tell a lie, just as she could never fathom a better life for herself. She never lied to me about my father's hatred towards me. She always had the decency to tell me true, even though, as a child, it was hard to hear it. But even then I knew the value of an honest word and I loved her for her mercilessness.

“Your father,” she would whisper the words against my ear as she held me to her, “nearly drowned the night you were born. His boat was overturned by the ferocious waves and his body was dragged under. He told me once that he would feel the breath seeping out of him, as though someone were stealing it from his lungs into theirs. Before his staring eyes, while his lungs burned, he saw a flash of a yellow-haired boy drawing in air just as it bubbled out from him. Later when he returned to us and saw you, he realised a horrible thing, understood what that vision had meant. That his son had begun to breathe the moment he had begun to die. That it had been, in fact, his own son who had stolen his father's panicked gasps of life to fuel his first. When your father fought to the surface and dragged himself onto the back of the capsized boat, you would not believe it, but all that distance away in our home, you nearly died in my arms. There is a delicate balance between you and your father. It is as though you share one spirit, and a flare in one causes a dimming in the

other. Your father knows that your strength drains him, and he, my darling, has chosen life.”

So we lived with this strange understanding between us, my father and I. It became a battle of wills between us, a battle for survival. We both knew that for one of us to live, the other would have to die. And each wanted to be the last man standing. Looking back, now, I wonder if after all, there had been some sort of love in my father's heart for me. For surely, it must have drained him to allow me to grow and live, when he could so easily have killed me in my youth. He must have hesitated to act for quite some time but then I finally forced his hand. I was gaining strength everyday, running the streets and swimming the waves around the shore. I knew that every sprint or dive that exhilarated me, far away on the ocean in his boat, drained him. He had, of course, expressly forbidden me to be too active but my mother had been too soft-hearted to keep me in our little house. With a firm warning to avoid too much activity she would send me on my way. But, you see, I wanted to live and only one man stood in my way, and if I was to survive I would have to be ready to best him when his challenge finally came.

I was coming of age when the moment I had been dreading finally arrived. My father invited me to go with him on his fishing boat and my mother, resigned, had allowed me to go. I guess she knew what would happen. I realise she did nothing to stop me. She only stood on the shore with an arm raised, watching me as the boat pulled further away from her. She watched me and I her, until she disappeared over the horizon. My father seemed very much drained and though, at first, he seemed to try hard to dredge up the energy to work, he soon grew tired and sat across from me with a bottle of wine. Soon he was swaying unsteadily, the sides of the boat grasped between his fingers. He watched me while he drank, muttering curses to himself, working himself into a towering frenzy of rage. And I watched him, my hand dipped into the churning water over the side of the boat. It calmed me. The first time he lashed out I was not ready for him. Distracted by the pull and push of the ocean between my fingers, I did not know to be aware of the sudden charge in the air between us, of the creak of the boat's wooden planks as he lurched towards me. I took the blow to the back of my head, where he had aimed it. It pitched me forward into the water. I remember going limp in surprise, staring in open mouthed shock as the water rushed up to meet my face. I did not even think to hold out my hands, I hit the water face first and sank like a bounced stone beneath the surface. Water rushed up my nostrils, and past my open mouth, down my gasping throat.

How long did I float under the waves? How long before the music replaced the deafening silence of the water? I cannot tell you. But somehow the sound reached me and it called forth from within me a desperate eagerness to live, to repay the fates that had so plagued me. I clawed myself from the water and collapsed upon a dirt-smearred path.

I heard a man speaking but could not make out the words, saw a figure approaching but

could not make out a face. My vision swam and, finally, I saw nothing more.

When I awoke, I was in such a place as the Golden One described but the words the men of The Order spoke to me were rather different.

“Your power is to give and take,” they said. “In giving you will always find the answers you seek, and in taking, the powers to fight against the evils of life. These things have brought you to us and they will take you as far as you wish to go.”

It was in The Order's temple that, having gathered so much power that my father had begun to fade from my memory, I met my Golden sister and Bronze brother.

The Bronze One

I was born in the middle of a battle, within my father's tent as war raged all around us. My mother was one of those women who could not bear to be left behind, so she followed my father, a poor soldier, from battlefield to battlefield. The beauty she had carried in her youth, faded into stooped shoulders and a nervous disposition constantly aggravated by the sounds of men dying in agony. The day of my birth dawned bloody. It was one of the most horrible defeats known to man, made famous by song and word. More nobles, warrior poets, and soldiers died that day than on any other. Their blood poured upon the fields in a cascade. It flooded over the plains and washed up to the edges of the tent. The warriors, my mother finally told me one day, would whisper that I had called all the spilled blood from the fields to come into me. For my hair was of deepest red, the only one of my kind known to my people. The men treated me with respect, for they felt I carried within me the courageous blood of their fallen men at arms, but also with fear, for they suspected I might carry the vile, tainted blood of their enemies within me as well. This was how I came to be a man, half-honoured, half-reviled. Treated with the utmost care. For though they were not yet sure if it would manifest itself for good or evil, they knew I contained great courage and a thirst for war unequalled by any. But my father always had hope in my goodness, his steady humour worked to soothe my most towering rages. He would provide balance whenever I needed it most.

I loved best to go hunting upon my war horse. He towered, at a monstrous seventeen hands, above most stallions. His coat shone as red as my hair. His eyes were wild, and he would gaze madly sideways, frothing at the mouth and gnashing his teeth furiously when others approached him. We would gallop over the body-strewn fields, his hooves sure on the blood-splattered earth. Together, even with my relative youth, we made a fearsome sight. My stallion would rear up on his hind legs, dancing forward dangerous steps with his front hooves flailing. I would cling to his back, one hand caught in his flowing mane, my legs tight around his flanks, my free hand swinging my

sword. We danced in arcs of blood as the bodies fell around us.

I took my place at my father's side in battle earlier than most, already proficient with a sword – especially so when riding. Perhaps four seasons passed us by in a whirlwind until one day when I fought at my father's side I watched him collapse and draw his last breath on the battlefield. I buried him alone that night as the fighting raged on. The heavens opened above me as I dug into the dirt with fingers and shield. It was a shallow grave, more a mound of dirt than an eternal resting place, but it would have to do. My father's soul, if not his body, would be winged from this place for he had died a warrior's death.

That night, as I slept, others plotted against me. They feared my power, now that I no longer had my father to temper my volatile moods. They betrayed me to the enemy and though I gave a spirited fight, they soon overwhelmed me. The enemy soldiers beat me to within an inch of my life and finally one of them came forward to sever my head from my shoulders, to end my life in such a way as to force shame upon my honour and name. To die like a coward. After everything I had done...

As time seemed to slow towards my demise I heard, strangely, the first gentle tone of a beautiful melody. It wove to me through an air thick with the smell of blood and rotting flesh. I heard the sound and it flowed through my being like a great flood. I arose in a sudden rush of movement, slashing against my oppressors with a manic power. I was free, covered in blood, shivering against the madness that had overtaken me. The soldiers lay dead in a wide circle around me while others fled to the hills. I had no care for them. My heart was focused on that song. It retreated and I could not help but pursue it. I pulled my battered body onto my stallion and pushed him out in pursuit of the retreating melody. It trailed through the field, past the trees and around the tents in which my mother and the others slept on, unaware that I was leaving them forever.

I went far, my head bowed low over my stallion's mane. The music called me and I followed blindly. I pulled up in a wood, dizzy. Shadows settled over me like a velvet cape.

I heard a whisper of sound from behind me in the darkness. The hair rose up on my neck. I felt in the grips of a chill. I spun around and saw several forms close behind me. So very close. I tried to lash out, the music had stopped, but soon found myself on the ground, the breath knocked out of me.

When I awoke, I was in such a place as the Golden and Silver Ones described but the words the men of The Order spoke to me were unique.

“Your power is to gather within you that which is in others,” they said. “In gathering you will always find the answers you seek and the powers to fight against the evils of life. These things have brought you to us and they will take you as far as you wish to go.”

It was in The Order's temple that, too frequently missing the glory of a good battle and riding my stallion often to compensate, I met and made kin of the Golden, Silver and Heroic Ones.

The Heroic One

I was born already wise, my hair white with knowledge and in mourning for the world's suffering. I was the last born to a long line of warriors, poets, great women and men alike. My grandfather had been a healer in good standing with the king, my father a sailor of much esteem, my mother a poet and personal favourite of the queen. I was raised on tales of greatness, of men and women who lived with courage and honour.

I spent my days in study. Philosophy, etiquette, sword play, horse riding, mathematics, astronomy, archery were all taught to me. I spent from sunrise until sundown struggling to keep up with my lessons, but my nights were my own. I passed them in silent contemplation with my two dogs resting in a black and white huddle at my side.

The silence then was absolute. The stillness broken only by the movements of my dogs as every now and then the animals would perk up to snarl, flat-eared, into the shadows beyond my camp fire, until finally they would scramble to their feet and bound off into the darkness. One snow white, the other jet black. Swallowed up by the night. Then I would truly be alone. Everything around me would come rushing back into my awareness. The chirping of the crickets, the snap of a twig, the rustle of the breeze. I would grow discomfited. I would think of my dogs and, immediately, they would appear at my side, quieting the world around me. Only they could ever stop the whispers that thundered in my head when the activity in my life paused for the night.

One day, during a lull in my studies, as I ate hurriedly at the dining table, my mother joined me. Her presence was a rare enough sight to cause me surprise, but it became stranger still when she addressed me.

“Do you never wonder at the voices, my son?” Her voice was low. “Your father and I together and here you are. I can hear the innermost wishes of the beasts and he of men, so you hear them all. I have stayed away from you until now because you needed your father's training to make you strong of body. But you are soon to be very powerful and you will need my guidance to control your abilities and make you strong of mind. Love is a liability in which we cannot afford to indulge. Now I must take you and teach you what I know.”

The next day she was waiting for me, already mounted with another stallion tethered at the side of hers. My dogs ran out ahead but as we rode out in silence, they fell into pace beside me. We travelled far and by midday, as the sun burned overhead, we reached a trickling stream at the heart

of a wood. My mother dismounted and had me do the same.

She beckoned me to sit beside her in the cool grass beside the stream.

“My son,” she gestured towards my two dogs, now coiled around me as I sat, “these two animals are your familiars. They were born to the castle bitch at the same instant you were. Their mother crept into my birthing room and halved my pain. These pups will do the same for you. Each takes a third of your anguish and thus gives you peace. But mark my words, strength does not come from avoiding the difficult. You must face the voices or they will overcome you. What I do, I do for loving you.”

So saying, she rose to her feet and strode forward to grasp my two unsuspecting dogs by the scruffs of their necks. She was a fast and formidable woman, and within seconds she had both animals bound by a rope around their necks which she held in one hand as she used the other to mount her horse. The dogs struggled against her, trying to claw their way back to me, but she restrained their collective force easily enough.

Her hard voice stilled me as I rose to go to them. “Stay,” she commanded and I did.

I watched her ride away in horrified silence. A second later the sounds descended. The gentle trickle of the stream became a gushing, the quiet breeze became a whirlwind, the woods seemed alive with malevolent forces, each closing in upon my location.

I clenched my hands against my ears, bellowing against the sounds. I wonder if my mother heard my cries as she rode away, if she considered turning back. The whispers began, bringing me to my knees in agony. I clawed at the earth and rose to my feet, fleeing into the woods, thinking at least to escape the whispers.

I must have collapsed. When I awoke, my head was still echoing with voices, with sounds. I held my head in my hands and curled into a ball. I felt that I would die.

Slowly, I became aware of a gentle melody, as though played with a strange trumpet. Weaving like a thread through the other noise in my head. It began to grow louder, blanketing the other sounds, steadying me. It pulled me to my feet and had me running to follow it through the woods. For whenever it faded from my hearing the other sounds returned to fill the void.

I crashed through the trees in pursuit of the sound. Low branches cut at my face and arms while flying leaves clung wetly to my hair and clothes. I tripped on a root and went flying. The earth rushed up to meet me. I hit the ground with a thud and lost my breath.

The music had stopped and the sounds of the forest rose louder than ever.

“He has heard us. He has answered our call. Bring him,” the whispers roared.

“Calm yourself,” one of them said, “you are amongst friends. We called a brave soul and you have answered us.”

I slept. I awoke again within a grand courtyard surrounded by robed and hooded men. They explained who they were.

“Your power is sound,” they said. “In sound you will always find the answers you seek, and the powers to fight against the evils of life. It has brought you to us and it will take you as far as you wish to go.”

It was in The Order's temple that, after many months of learning to channel the sounds I heard and with my dogs finally returned to me, I met and made kin of the Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron Ones.

The Iron One

I was barely a man when my mother fled for her life, dragging me along and leaving my dead father's body in our wake. It was a time of immense turmoil when fortunes were made and lost during one cycle of the sun and empires were built and eroded beneath the thundering cannons of another. My father's brother, my own uncle, had laid siege to my father's hold, blasting its surrounding walls and slaying its citizens. The brothers had always fought for supremacy and now having raised enough men for the endeavour and fearing that my growing into manhood would cement my father's claim to my grandfather's title, my uncle had attacked.

But let me begin from the proper place. I was born in midday at the hottest time of the year. The earth seemed parched dry. The dirt cracked and rose in dust swirls to the sky at the slightest breeze. People said that I must have leached the life from the grounds and woven my own form from their life-giving richness, for I had the brown eyes and hair of the most fertile soil, even though all in my kingdom had been born with grey hair. At the time of my birth my father and his brother seemed to have suspended their hostilities and shared a tenuous truce. They were, at least for the most part, civil.

I spent my youth running wild. My parents did not have much time for me and, truly, I did not for them. I enjoyed being in the sun, the feel of the warm rays beating down on me was bliss. Even in winter, my skin seemed to retain the summer's heat. I felt no cold and instead grew like a flower beneath the sun. I was healthy and active. I never attended the studies my parents arranged for me within our home, I loved the outdoors too much to be kept in. It was much later, on the day that my uncle turned against us, that I realised that the sun could also be a ferocious tool of destruction. It could burn and savage what should not be, it could cleanse.

I would pass my days climbing trees and mountains, swimming rivers and pursuing wildlife. Without realising it I had taught myself a lot. I learned the wilderness as though it were my home,

learned to track animals with the stealth of a predator and could survive utterly and completely on my own. I grew strong and thoughtful.

So it was that time passed, until one day my father broke the first rule. He asked a guest a question before the man had stated his needs. It was a small enough infraction, barely noticeable, even for the people in attendance. But it was marked by fate's hand, and so unleashed an avalanche of consequences. It was the beginning of the end.

Barely a week had passed before my uncle, visiting our hold, unfortunately overstayed his welcome and became a burden to our house.

So angry was my father at his brother's discourtesy, that when my uncle finally departed a few days later, he refused to give his brother the customary parting gift.

And just like that our destinies had been sown.

We heard rumours that we were not alone. That many other kingdoms were beset with the same problems, brother turning on brother, enemies forming where once friendships thrived. But by this time my father was dead and his hold was in flames behind us. My uncle would find nothing to salvage from the wreckage I had wrought. The flames, my flames, had seen to that.

My mother and I fled to her father's holding. It took us many days to reach it and we travelled poorly, waiting for an attack on our little party that thankfully never came. My grandfather was an aged, but still powerful, man and he welcomed us back kindly, even as he sent his best warriors to wreak revenge upon my uncle. I stayed in my grandfather's hold until I was of age. It was in the far north and saw little light. I learned to drink harder from the warmth in the short summers and to use it more sparingly in winter time. The winters also served to keep me indoors so I finally attended to my studies. I filled the silences in my knowledge with information.

Then one year turned out to be particularly difficult. It had been a very short summer, and now the winter refused to end. I was nearly drained of my power. I lay slumped at the table over my food, too weak even to eat it. I was lolling about, nearly fainting, when I first heard it.

The gentle strains of a beautiful melody. It drew my body straight, and led me from the hold. I wandered, nearly stumbling on my own feet, past the walls and out into the field beyond. My feet slipped upon the frost and ice. The bitter wind battered my face and body. Yet I pushed forward, blindly following the retreating throb of sound. When the music suddenly stopped, my burst of energy faded from me and I sank to my knees.

I heard the whispers from behind me and flopped to the floor as I tried to swing around.

“He has heard us. He has answered our call. Bring him,” they said.

“Calm yourself,” one of them said, “you are amongst friends. We called a brave soul and you have answered us.”

When I awoke, I was lying within a grand courtyard surrounded by hooded men. They explained who they were.

“Your power is dark and light,” they said. “In one you will always find the answers you seek, and in the other the powers to fight against the evils of life. Dark and light have brought you to us and they will take you as far as you wish to go.”

It was in The Order's temple that, after many months of gathering light and dark, I met and made kin of the Golden, Silver, Bronze and Heroic Ones.

The Tale of All of Them Together

“We each,” said the Golden One, “were given training with our special skill. We were given everything we needed. We grew strong and we also grew close. We learned to share our thoughts and speak as one. These men and I became inseparable, the five who answered the call of the melody.”

The Bronze One nodded. “The men of The Order had told us who they were, but finally, after years of training, they told us what they did. 'We gather the strongest and the most just from around the region,' they said to us. 'We are building an army to fight injustice wherever it is found. You are our most prized fighters. You five shall work together to battle the greatest evils that taint our great land.'”

“They told us that they had each seen in a dream a rising darkness. They did not know what it was or from whence it came, but knew that we five must be ready to defeat it,” the Iron One continued. “They told us to search for the man with two faces. That he would not only tell us what we had to defeat, but also how to do so.”

“We left The Order in sadness,” the Bronze One intoned. “It had become our home, after all, had rescued us each in some particular way. The men had become as our fathers, it was especially hard to leave them. But we knew our destiny and were wise enough to see it through without question.

We travelled in a tight pack with the two dogs running alongside us and the falcon streaking the clouds above. The day passed in hard travel as we refused to stop and rest, pushing on mercilessly. By the time the sun had set, a heavy fog had settled around us as we moved slowly through a wood towards the mountain fortress where it was rumoured the man with two faces dwelt. The trees loomed like strange shadows before us, the ground below concealed in the vapour. The wood was still, deafeningly quiet. Our Heroic brother set forth his dogs into the darkness and allowed the noises into his head, searching for anything that did not belong. From far above us, the

Golden One's falcon called down to us through the stillness. Our Iron brother called a fire to blaze before us and sealed within a bubble, like a lantern, it bobbed before us. We moved further through the forest. Our progress was slow but soon we had scaled the mountain far enough so that the fog sunk heavily beneath us. By the time we reached the summit, the sun had risen in the sky. The sight that awaited us froze our hearts within our chests.”

“The man with two faces was no mortal man but rather the mountain itself. His giant stone face towered from the peak to the ground far below us. We stood upon the ridges of his shoulder, staring at both his profiles. To the north a face of unimaginable anger, to the south: one of absolute happiness. Our collective shouts of understanding must have awakened him. Both sets of eyelids rose, revealing great stone eyes, with irises the width of two men together. North face yawned and south face coughed.”

'Who dares awaken the god of beginnings, the lord of transitions, the guardian of the bridge and the gate?' The mountain roared to the groan of ancient trees and the rumble of stone.

'We are five warriors come to seek the wisdom of the man with two faces.'

'Five warriors?' The mountain groaned as two sets of eyes tried to swivel in our direction.

'Five humans?' The deafening sound continued. 'I have no time or use for humans.'

'Great god, we are not like the others. We are of The Order and come to destroy an evil force from the earth.'

'The Order?' A tree coiled like a moustache over the north face ripped free of its moorings and tumbled down the mountain. The face watched it fall with creases on its forehead dislodging great avalanches of stones. We fought to keep seated upon our mounts, the horses in turn struggling to keep their footing atop the shaking ground.

'Now look what you've done.' The southern face admonished us. 'You have upset him. This is no way to gain favour.'

'No indeed,' North face groaned. 'I had been growing that tree for four hundred years.'

'We will plant you another,' Bronze brother spoke up wearily.

'I want it bigger than the one I lost,' North face was staring ahead with a dogged expression.

'You shall have it,' Golden One spoke up.

'I want it before I consent to helping you.'

'Please, great god,' Silver brother interrupted. 'We know this duty with which we are tasked to be one of some urgency. Can you help us on our quest?'

'I am the god of beginnings, the lord of transitions, the guardian of the bridge and the gate.' Both faces spoke at once in the same rumbling voice. 'What do you seek to know?'

'We seek a force of great evil. We seek to destroy it.'

'Your answer lies in two directions. One over a bridge and the other through a gateway. There is one thing you should remember, should you wish to defeat this evil. It is all a matter of time and movement. Forwards through time and upwards in movement. You will know this force when you see it, but be vigilant, it shows itself in the most unexpected forms and it is manifold.'

"My brothers and I discussed the matter amongst ourselves," the Silver One said. "We decided that I and the Golden and Bronze Ones would journey over the bridge while our brothers Heroic and Iron would travel through the gateway. We told the faces our decision and they opened their mouths to admit us. North face would lead us over the bridge and south face through the gateway. We bid each other farewell and good luck and went our separate ways."

Over the Bridge (The Tale of the First Day)

We led our horses over the lips of the north face and through a shimmering veil. Before us unrolled a great steel bridge, the likes of which we had never seen before. As we stood, hesitating for a moment, the lips sealed closed behind us. We stepped on to the bridge and found it steady and sure. We crossed the span of it without incident and emerged on the other side unscathed. We found ourselves in the centre of a strange and marvellous square. All around us were towering structures, crafted of steel and glass into grotesque and astounding shapes. The colossal edifices seemed to carry a presence, they loomed and glared down through mirrored eyes. The ground beneath our feet reflected us as we walked over it. To look down was to look up again. Not one plant grew in this place. Nature had met its match in these builders.

But for all the terrific sights, the place seemed deserted. We saw not one face, nor heard one voice. We walked from the square, squeezing between the tall, rounded structures. Our mounts slid now and then upon the glossy floor before righting their footing. When the sun set, it struck the windows all around us with blinding force, and rebounded a million times. For the time the world was white with brightness. Our stallions roared in protest and pranced, throwing us to the ground. I shielded my eyes and waited for the horror to pass. Finally the light behind my eyelids seemed to fade and I opened my eyes to find my brothers doing the same. We stumbled to our feet and found our stallions after some searching. They had sheltered on the edges of a deep gorge which stretched outwards, a great yawning void, like a drain in the centre of another circle of misshapen steel and glass structures. The void descended into the earth, disappearing into shadow.

A great humming vibration of sound arose from within the depths of the void. We walked slowly towards it, leaving our rides behind us. The falcon soared overhead.

We looked as a group over the edge; four thin stairways of the same mirrored material that

covered the roads led down into the shadowy depths of the void. The stairs were steep and without a railing, alongside them the sides of the void fell away at a gentle curve shaped as smoothly as glass. There would be no way to stop falling, should one begin to.

We didn't hesitate to descend, despite the horror blossoming in our hearts. Golden first, Silver next, with Bronze guarding our backs.

The roar from below grew louder as we descended. Soon the lights from above had begun to fade and the darkness yawned before us. Then we were in the dark, walking down the stairs by touch alone, unable to see. From far below a pinprick of light appeared. It widened as we neared it and soon, we were able to see the stairs beneath our feet from its glow. The humming sound was now a thunderous, never ending bellow.

Finally we were close enough to see what was causing the horrible sound, to see who, perhaps, had built this marvellous and grotesque city. We were stunned by what was revealed.

Men and women. People like us. Hardly the strange beasts we had been expecting from the noise. They sat in a stadium of sorts, with circles of seats descending to what must have been the centre of the world, it went so far. It was those people humming that strange, awesome, and sonorous chant.

The Golden One struggled with the noise, of course, her power was in silence. But for the Silver and Bronze Ones the place was a font of power. For the one whose power it was to give and take, for the other who gathered within that which was in others – this was a citadel of seething magic.

The Bronze One especially, gorged like a monster upon the collective power of the crowd. The air around him sizzled with flames, his eyes blazed with a crazed fire. Silver could balance but Bronze could not. He simply took, and his warhorse – the only one to steady his power – was far above them upon the surface of the world, going mad with its master's infusion of energy.

The Golden One moved to subdue him, but it was already too late. We had drawn the attention of the crowd.

The humming sound that roared so extraordinarily, died down in a heartbeat. The dying echoes of the sound wound upwards out of the void and left us in silence.

It was only then, as everything stilled around us, that we finally saw the activity at the heart of everything, at the centre of the strange citadel.

The earth spewed fire. And, piled so high within the flames that we could make out the tops of the mounds, were slaughtered people.

In the silence, the Golden One blazed with power. In an instant, she understood. She saw the bodies dissolving upon the flames and compared them to the ones turned in their thousands to stare

at her and her brothers. She saw that upon the flames there were the misshapen, the plump, the old, the different. In the crowds the same strange face stared back out at her from thousands of different bodies.

A sharp cry tore through the silence. Golden One watched as her falcon streaked in a dive towards us from the mouth of the void. It dived with its talons held forward and landed upon the face of a crowd member closest to them. The falcon clawed the face of the man before soaring back up and away. There was a strange silence as the crowd turned as one to face the scarred man amongst them.

They attacked as one.

It was as though the man's scarred and bleeding face sparked a blood lust within them. They pitched themselves upon the man in a wave of bodies.

We watched until the man disappeared beneath the flailing pile of arms and legs and then we turned and fled back up the steps. Our steps rang out above the horrible sounds rising from below us from the roiling mass of bodies the crowd had become. We didn't slow in the darkened place at the centre of the void.

The falcon shrilled its battle cry and plummeted suddenly past Silver and Bronze. We paused to follow it with our eyes and saw to our horror that the Golden One was tumbling back down the steps.

The Golden One lurched into the air, away from the steps entirely, and she met our eyes for an instant as she fell.

“Go.” Her last shout echoed through the space.

Below, thousands of faces turned up towards us, smeared with blood and gristle.

We saw the faces, saw the tumbling body of our comrade, the bird keeping pace at her side, heard her last command.

We obeyed.

Through the Gateway (The Tale of the First Day)

We led our horses over the lips of the south face and through a shimmering veil. An ancient wooden gate, the likes of which we had never seen, towered over us. Intricate designs and patterns had been carved into the wood, turning the rough surface into a delicate lacy print. We, the Heroic and Iron Ones, pressed our hands to the gate and pushed. The door gave at our slightest touch as though pulled inwards.

We stood upon a green and lush mountaintop. The sky was a clear blue awash with gentle

white clouds. We walked across the field, our boots smearing the dew upon the crisp grass.

The ground sloped down gradually and below us we beheld a beautiful sight. In a valley set into an alcove on a beach below, was a tiny village. Its houses stood on tall stilts and the waves broke upon the wooden beams below the structures. The water was a dark and tempestuous blue topped with Arctic white. The sun beat down upon us and Iron one soaked it in while the two dogs rolled with glee in patches of mud.

We decided to go to the village below and finally began climbing down the sheer rock face to get there. The dogs were left behind by necessity but they watched us pensively over the cliff face as we carefully worked our way down over the edge.

It took us many hours of climbing, with no rest and no nourishment, to finally reach the valley. The sound of the waves was deafening and the Heroic One struggled without the calming presence of his dogs. To his shame, he had come to rely on them again from the moment they had been returned to him. He steadied himself with his hard-earned strength and together we worked our way towards the houses.

The water had been low when we started our climb down, but in the intervening hours it had risen so that, swimming we were level with the doors of the outermost houses.

We swam up to the nearest door and knocked, treading water as we waited. No answer. As we swam around to the next home the Iron One noticed a beam of light shining out from a gap between the two dwellings. We dived down beneath the waves as one, swam under the houses and emerged into a circle of light.

We broke the surface and each of us drew in a breath at what we saw.

All around us, standing upon submerged stilts, were the homes, but without walls between them. Each open to the other with walkways made of wooden planks leading from one living-space to the next. The only walls were those of the outermost houses with doors facing outwards as though for show. For they were obviously not in use.

People walked between the houses upon the planks as though they were roads, while some children bathed in an area off to the side.

It was not long before muttering amongst the inhabitants of the strange village, alerted us to the fact that we had been seen. A strange quiet descended. We stayed silent, kicking to stay afloat, unsure of how to proceed.

Finally Heroic brother spoke. "We do not mean you harm. We come as friends. We are visitors."

What he had said seemed to calm the people and finally an old man came forward.

"I am one of the elders," the old man trembled as he spoke, "I invite the visitors to my

home. You are welcome to follow me there and make yourselves known to my people.”

So saying, the elder gestured for others to help lift us from the water and onto one of the platforms. The water sloshed over our feet as we followed in the elder's footsteps. He led us towards one of the centre-most homes of the little village.

We sat cross-legged upon a woven straw mat. The elder had gathered a small group of other old men and they sat in a circle now facing us.

“We have come from far away to find you,” the Iron One spoke first. “We seek a great evil from your world.”

The elders looked confused. “There is no evil here. We live as we have always lived: in peace.”

“How did you come to live in this miraculous place?” Heroic One asked.

The elder smiled. “We are a people who revere tradition and custom. We have not changed our lives since our people first settled here at the beginning of the new times. Our homes used to stand upon land, but as time ate away at our mountain, and the ground crumbled beneath us, we were forced to build supports under our homes to keep them standing. Over time, the mountain fell away entirely and we were forced to build these walkways between our homes, cutting out the walls that stood in the way of our constructions. We kept the outer walls to shield our homes from strangers. Though our times may have changed, we have stayed steadfast in our ways.”

The elder waved a hand, and two servants came forward with delicately wrought goblets that they handed to us.

“We must drink a toast to welcome you as our guests, and for you to acknowledge us as your hosts.”

The Heroic One, unbeknownst to the elders around him, was hearing, not what they said, but what they thought. He knew, though they had done nothing outwardly to betray themselves, that they were the evil that he and his brother sought.

There was something dark about their magical little village and the Heroic One recognised now that it was controlled by fear. Things always changed. To remain wilfully the same was a strange phenomenon, an aberration almost. He did not drink, holding the goblet thoughtfully in his hand. Iron One, keen to his brother's emotions, as all five were to one another, saw his actions and copied them.

“Why do you not drink?” The elder asked.

“We do not drink,” the Iron One spoke up. “We apologise but it is against the rules of our Order.”

“The covenant of the host and guest must not be broken. It is how things have always been

done.” The elders were glaring now with dark malevolent eyes.

Heroic looked at Iron and Iron gazed back. “Is this how you always greet your guests? With poison?”

The elders stood as one. “It is how things have always been done.”

We stood also.

“It is how things have always been done,” the elders chanted, louder with each breath. Their cries attracted the attention of others in the village and people stopped going about their business to turn and stare.

We glanced at each other and dived into the waters just beyond the floor of the house. We pushed deep into the water, going down until the lights from above faded and we were swimming in shadows. We waited, gripping the twining weeds at the bottom of the ocean, our feet floating above the ground, as members of the village splashed around above us, diving under the homes and all around the supporting stilts.

Iron One brushed against what he thought was a weed. A glance proved that it was not. It took an instant to realise what he was seeing and suddenly the breath in his lungs spilled out in a torrent of shocked bubbles. All around us floated bloated and peeling bodies, tied around the waist with a thick rope and dragged down with a heavy rock.

Here were the guests who had come to the village before them.

Our thrashing attracted the swimmers from above and they speared down towards us through the water.

Over the Bridge (The Tale of the Second Day)

We fled upwards over the glimmering reflective stairs. Our hearts were heavy. We had lost one of our number. But we also understood the seriousness of our current situation. Dashing after the Golden One would have been both foolhardy and pointlessly dangerous, better to reach safety, assess our situation and proceed with caution in retrieving our fallen comrade. We emerged onto level ground in a burst of motion. Our stallions awaited us and we mounted quickly and galloped from the void. The clatter of our horses' hooves was thunderous over the reflective surface of the city as we pushed the animals through the deserted streets. After a time, it struck us forcibly that the city was, or at least seemed to be, never ending. The structures dotted the landscape and towered overhead in a never-ending wave.

We retreated to the centre of the bridge to discuss what to do.

The Bronze One was overcome with horror and abjection at his loss of power. He blamed

himself for Golden One's fall.

“We must wait until those monsters leave and return to the citadel,” he insisted, staring out at the strange world before us. “I have a feeling that both the Golden One and the evil that we seek are to be found in that place.”

We waited upon the bridge as the sun set further, casting the world in darkness. After viewing the roads in the light of day, we were grateful for nightfall.

We were deep in conversation when a series of bells rang out. What should have been a beautiful sound rang metallic and empty, accompanied by the sound of spinning gears. Travelling fast in the wake of the bells was a torrent of sound from the people emerging in their thousands from the citadel.

We were far enough away that we were sure of not being seen, yet the sound was a heady reminder of the horrors we had already witnessed that day. It seemed that we could still scent the burning and blistered pile of bodies on the air.

The Bronze One clenched his fists at the sound of the crowd. “Their energy is pure evil,” he gritted out. “I was not ready for it before but I am ready now.”

Indeed, as though to prove his words he remained calm and still, though a bead of sweat did work its way down his temple, as we waited for the sounds of the crowd to settle.

After some time, when the world was in pitch darkness around us and the town had fallen silent, we arose from our hiding place and, leaving our mounts, walked stealthily back in the direction of the town.

The place loomed dark and terrible in the gloom. Not a voice could be heard or a light seen from any of the buildings. Utter silence reigned. The reflective streets stood pristine and empty between the grotesque undulations of the blank forbidding buildings. At perfect intervals stood tall thin metal street lights, their pale glow reflecting upon the ground, shining down on nothingness. We crept along the streets, with a light-footedness that belied our stature and build. We kept to the centre of the pavements, avoiding proximity to the uniformly opaque and reflective buildings.

The void gaped at us from a distance, glowing eerily from within. We had expected there would be guards, especially after we had alerted the entire congregation to our presence in spectacular style, but there was no-one about. We crossed to the mouth of the void and split apart, each taking a different staircase down, just in case we should meet with any resistance.

We moved quickly down our respective staircases, keeping pace with each other, alert to everything around us. We stepped down from the last stair onto the ground in unison and went directly to the pit at the centre.

The stench was so strong as to assault all our senses, our eyes watered, the air felt thick and

tangible with the horrific odour. And yet, we pressed on, feeling the Golden One near.

We stood alongside the pit. It opened up beneath us, showing that the pile of bodies had burned down significantly from its previous height. As we stood, taking in the horrors before us, the Silver One perceived a low voice groaning.

We circled the pit, choking back bile, reaching for the voices we could just hear over the roar of the flames.

The volume of the voices grew and finally the Bronze One's fumbling hands pulled a lever and revealed, with the sliding away of a metal segment in the wall, a cage.

A cage lined with hay, reeking of excrement and stuffed full of people. So low was the cage that the people crouched or sat to avoid striking their heads. The people scrambled back like animals from the light, some hissing like wild beasts.

“We will not hurt you,” Bronze rushed to assure the prisoners, “we are here to help you. Who has trapped you here?” His deft hands were already working his dagger into the intricate set of lights that must have been the lock.

A woman crawled forward and pressed her face against the steel bars desperately. “Do you mean what you say? Have you truly come to save us?”

When we assured her it was so, she tried to rally the others, more dejected and broken than her, to wakefulness.

“What is this place? Where are we?” We asked her.

“You are in the holiest place of my people. We here are to be sacrificed to the Fires That Cleanse,” the woman explained, then hesitated at the perplexed looks upon our faces. “You are strangers here. And dressed like the days of old. Where have you come from?”

“We are brothers from an order that punishes injustice and cruelty. We have come to seek out and destroy a great evil.”

“Then you have found it,” the woman nodded. “Our society reveres change and progress. Anything that is old is a link to a past already forgotten. Anybody who does not conform physically or mentally to the ideal is considered backwards and impure. Anything old is thought to be a blight on progress. My friends and I,” she gestured to the other prisoners, “we are worshippers of the old ways. Our culture is an ancient one, our ways are simple. But to these people we are dangers to be exterminated. They feed us to the flames to cleanse their world of the past. There is a power to the flames and when they are fed they can be controlled. We are the food.”

The lock frizzled and burst open.

Through the Gateway (The Tale of the Second Day)

Meanwhile we, the Heroic and Iron Ones, struck out under the buildings and towards the cliff face. We hoped against hope that if we could reach the cliff and climb it, then the villagers would not pursue.

Hope flared in our hearts when we reached the cliff face and emerged from the water already climbing. The splashes behind us faded away as our pursuers fell behind.

Our furs hanging heavy with water, we fought to climb the sheer rock face. In the darkness that had fallen, it was near impossible to see and the ledges and crevices we had used on our way down were much harder to detect on the way back up. Our cold, wet fingers slid on the rocks, causing showers of stone to fall beneath us and splash into the water below.

As we struggled upwards we heard a series of thumps that paused our progress and drew our glances downwards.

To our horror, the villagers seemed as adept at climbing as they had been at swimming. Having lived for so long with the precarious footing of their strange village and being forced to climb the cliff face every day had gifted them with an amazing agility. The villagers had leapt from the water onto the cliff with the loose-limbed grace of monkeys. They clung on with their long thin fingers and were soon scrambling ever upwards, closing in on us with incredible speed.

We forced ourselves higher, cutting our fingers upon the jagged rocks until the blood became a further impediment in our struggles to escape. Heroic One caught an overhanging ledge after a desperate upwards leap and discovered that his fingers gripped something more significant than a slab of stone. He pulled himself up and, realising that he had stumbled upon a cave, called to Iron One to join him. He watched as the shadows of the scrambling villagers drew nearer. Truly, they looked monstrous, their hunched backs and gripping fingers like those of gnarled beasts cloaked in shadows.

Heroic One drew his sword and slashed at a villager's grasping fingers with his left hand as he clasped right arms with Iron One. There was a scream from below us and a splash as the villager tumbled into the sea.

We stood side by side at the mouth of the cave. Our swords seemed to appear and disappear in flashes of moonlight as we slashed down at the villagers who continued to swarm up at us through the darkness, clinging to the mountainside and bubbling upwards in endless waves.

The villagers soon realised the pointlessness of the situation and retreated from the mouth of the cave. But we could sometimes hear them still. The breeze carried the villagers' mutterings into the cave and we knew that they waited for us just beyond our reach.

We passed the night in such a fashion. We each sat on one side of the entrance to our cave, sword at the ready should the creatures below try again to force their way up. The villagers outside had taken to taunting us during the night.

“You will die here, you know. Why not just give in to us?”

“It is for the best. Change is danger. You know too much and you will tell others. Those others will want to visit also. They will bring change. Don't you see how reasonable this all is?”

We paid the villagers no heed. For while we were silent, we were plotting. We had been wholly unprepared for what we had encountered and had failed ourselves as a result. Now we would be returning from a position of knowledge and strength. We met each other's eyes across the cave. It was clear to both of us that we would need to attack the evil at the very heart of this place. We would have to return to the village and destroy it.

We each considered what stood before us and planned how we would face the villagers waiting for us outside the cave, upon the cliff face. How we would reach the village and set about destroying it.

We waited until the sun began to rise then stood to prepare.

Over the Bridge (The Tale of the Third Day)

“We cannot destroy the fire if that is where the Golden One has gone,” the Silver One said.

“You must,” the woman pressed, now standing and gripping us by the arms. “Whosoever falls amongst the sacrificed, I am afraid, is lost forever.”

We, the Bronze and Silver Ones, looked upon one another. We knew the poor woman only spoke out of ignorance. After all, how could one as wretched as she begin to imagine the power of the Golden One?

It was the Silver One who finally spoke, addressing himself to the woman. “Can you lead the others to safety? My brother and I will stay behind and destroy this temple. Wait for us upon the steel bridge.” He addressed himself to the woman.

“I will do as you ask, kind strangers,” she replied quickly, “but what if you do not meet us upon the bridge?”

“If we do not come or you find yourselves in danger cross the bridge to the end, go through the veil and you will find yourself safe in a world other than this one.”

We watched as she and the other prisoners hurried up one of the staircases.

“How can we destroy this place?” The Silver One spoke although we both wondered the same thing.

“We must overflow it.”

We separated, striking out with our swords at the metal rows of seats, slashing them to ribbons, throwing the shreds over our shoulders into the pit behind us. We worked quickly, despite the stench, despite the heat. Our muscles bulged with exertion, screaming in protest and sheened with sweat. Our swords of justice cut through steel as though it were butter.

Finally, after the first three rows had been demolished, the pit began to smoulder and belch smoke. The air turned putrid and acrid.

We struggled on, slashing, tearing away, throwing, certain that we were succeeding albeit slowly. The flaming pit belched green smoke and a thick cloyingly sweet odour. We kept cutting, redoubling our efforts, now thirty rows out, with the twenty-nine behind us stripped to their twisted stumps.

Now forty and still we continued with our destruction. The flames rose higher and higher from the pit. The ground beneath our feet began to tremble as though some gigantic and horrible beast were roaring its fury from deep within the earth. The steel edges of the pit began to shimmer and melt under the green flames. The ground around the abyss began to cave inwards with the shrill sound of rending steel.

And still we kept slashing. Only a small cluster of rows remained before the sloping walls and the staircases began. We tore through them and paused with our arms torn and bleeding from the shredded steel and glanced back at the pit.

The ground before us continued to collapse more quickly into the spreading flames, the pit now a gaping chasm that expanded outwards voraciously.

We fled up the staircase and to safety with all the strength left within us, pumping our arms for speed. Below us the caving pit and its crawling flames spread to the walls of the citadel and began to lick at the stairs.

We were past the halfway point, emerging again into the glow of the lights above, when the steps began to rumble beneath our feet. We ran, one a scant breath behind the other as we hurtled up the steps.

Five steps remaining. Four. Three. Two. One.

Bronze One leapt clear of the void and rolled to the side as Iron One did the same. We hurried immediately to our feet and stumbled away beneath the street lights.

The rumble from the pit was rising steadily, and within seconds it had blossomed into a screeching, tearing mass of sound.

We ran through the streets. All around us opaque windows suddenly snapped clear, revealing a sea of expressionless, uniform faces staring out at us as we stumbled past.

We did not pause to look into the faces around us, nor to glance behind at the void that was now stretching further into the city, gobbling up some unlucky structures that lurked too close. Ahead of us, people began spilling out of the buildings, their features twisting into revolting masks crazed with anger and frothing with rage.

We ground to a halt, the rabble at our front, the flames at our back, imagining our fight to be over. But just as we stopped we heard a clatter of hooves upon the strange pavements and suddenly the people before us were sailing helplessly through the air.

The Bronze One's stallion burst through the crowd of townspeople, trampling them heedlessly underfoot in his ferocious struggle to reach us. We leapt upon the creature's back and galloped with it to safety.

We made it to the bridge where we met again with the anxious prisoners. We led them down the bridge towards the thin shimmering veil and out of the mouth of the northern face.

Behind us, the world continued to collapse.

Through the Gateway (The Tale of the Third Day)

We, the Heroic and Iron Ones, leapt from the mouth of the cave to the sea below. The tide was low, we had expected that.

The villagers upon the cliff face screeched upon seeing us break the surface of the water and dived down after us. But we were ready, treading water with our swords held aloft. We cut the villagers from the sky as they fell, moving quickly, until the waters around us bobbed with severed limbs. Soon we were swimming through the bloody water towards the village.

The village seemed quiet. Apparently the sounds of the battle had not awakened them.

We sheathed our swords and swam towards the stilts upon which the houses stood. We climbed the stilts painstakingly, using our daggers to slice footholds where the wood had been worn smooth by the lapping waves. We reached the top of the stilts and peeked over into the homes.

The inhabitants were awake and a couple spotted us in an instant. Within a heartbeat they were yelling, alerting the other villagers to our arrival.

We dragged ourselves onto the walkways and stood to face the villagers, unsheathing our swords to meet the onslaught as they fell upon us in waves, their crude weapons glinting in the cold rays of the morning sun. They wielded their fishing javelins and cooking knives with savage precision.

Iron One swerved to one side to avoid a javelin and slashed out with his sword arm in an arc, the motion followed by a spray of blood. The javelin, dragged by rope back to its owner, flew

again towards Iron One and this time found its mark. Its point ripped across Iron One's arm as he fought the crowd closing in on him.

Across the village the Heroic One cleared a path across one of the walkways, towards a cluster of men whose nude bodies had been painted in brilliant green and blue streaks. The men were unarmed but still they approached Heroic One with malevolent expressions twisting their leering faces. Each held his right hand clenched and beckoned the Heroic One with his left. He watched them warily, circling his sword thoughtfully in front of him. He was an honourable warrior, after all, and would never sink to killing the unarmed, but the way they approached him made his hackles rise. He could scent the danger.

His hesitation was his downfall.

The painted men opened their right hands and blew across their palms towards him.

In an instant, the Heroic One was engulfed in a cloud of fine silver powder. It seeped into his mind, through his nostrils and mouth, blinding him. His eyes ran with tears and when he opened them, he reeled back in horror at the sight before him.

The villagers were no longer men and women, but appeared to him monstrous winged creatures with glowing eyes and great, twisted faces.

His mind rebelled at what his eyes were witness to. The Heroic One yelled out, flailing against the creatures and lashing out wildly with his sword, fighting the blindness, the terror that threatened to engulf him. He felt the blows the monstrous villagers rained down on him, his strength drained and his body weakening. As he fell to the ground, the Heroic prince thought how sad it was that he would die upon the floor, sliced to ribbons by the demonic minions of a great evil.

As the Heroic One collapsed to the ground, a streak of brown raced across his blurred eyes. A flash of boots. The clash of steel. Suddenly all around him, the villagers began to fall, their bodies thudding over him and rolling over the walkways to crash into the waters far below. As his vision cleared, Heroic One beheld his saviour.

The Iron One stood bathed in blood. Victorious.

We stood together, still reeling, struggling to stand and looked around at the trail of destruction that we had wrought. The village was in ruins. Only one thing remained to be done. For as long as the village stood its evil force would continue to thrive and, no doubt in time, find more servants to do its bidding.

We leapt over the side of the dwelling and hit the water with a splash that displaced the floating corpses of the villagers.

Quickly we set about hacking at one of the village's supports with our swords. We focused our combined strength on a single beam, knowing that felling one would unbalance the entire

structure and knowing that our escape would have to be swift if we were to survive this adventure.

Soon our swords had cleaved deep into the wooden support and, sheathing them, we set our shoulders to the beam, struggling to dislodge it while treading water.

The village above us began to creak and groan. Bits of wood began to snap off and shower down as we strained below. A great snap resounded, like an ancient tree ripping from its moorings. Satisfied with our work, we swam quickly away from the village towards the cliff face and freedom.

Behind us the structure continued to shudder and rain down wood and limp bodies.

We watched from a safe distance as the beam we had been hacking snapped in half and sent the entire village crashing down after it in a terrific rush. It tumbled down with a great roar of sound and splashed in roiling waves into the churning water.

We turned our backs upon the sorry sight and began to climb back up the cliff. After having attempted the feat in the dead of night and in full retreat, it seemed a simple task to scale the cliff in the light of day. We pulled ourselves up over the steep rock face and finally emerged over the top and to safety. The Heroic One's dogs were there to greet their master.

We sat resting on the edge of the cliff, the dogs jostling happily beside us, and watched the village disappear into the swirling ocean. The water circled in frothing waves for several moments before all was stillness once more. It seemed as though nothing had ever taken place, as though no village had ever stood upon the spot.

We did not tarry long. We left the lush mountaintop eagerly, passing quickly back through the ancient wood gate through which we had entered and through the shimmering veil and out onto the stone lips of the south face.

“So,” said the Golden One to her brothers, “that is how you have come to meet me here.”

The Golden One's Tale of the Fires that Cleanse

That day, as I lost my footing upon the steps, I was certain I would never see any of you again. As you, Silver and Bronze Ones, disappeared from the citadel and I fell towards the pit of flames, I thought surely that my end had come. In those moments that I fell, I saw all my life laid bare before me, like the pages of a book caught in a wind. I had always sought solitude over company. I had left my mother and father, the land of my birth, behind without a single farewell or a flicker of regret. But in that moment I thought was my last, I rued what I had done, the person I had become and the choices I had made.

Not war, I thought, but love. Not me, but us.

Surely that was the point of all things?

But I had left it too late. Gone too long with the dead weight of unsaid words burdening my soul.

I thought all this as I fell. It must have taken mere seconds, but time unravelled before me into centuries.

My beloved falcon was streaking down towards me from above. I thought how I had brought that noble bird to this moment. To this moment when we both hurtled to our deaths.

I hit the centre of the pit with a force that emptied me of breath. I felt the flames upon my back, lapping at my sides, and for just a moment, felt the bodies soft and gelatinous beneath me.

Then, I was falling further.

The bodies gave way and I was hurtling deep into the abyss. I saw the roots of the earth's trees woven into a canopy above me and knew that I was falling to the very centre of our world. My faithful companion did not hesitate in his dive to follow me through the hole I had made bursting through, just as the bodies shifted again to seal the opening.

I landed with a bone-jarring thud and lay for a moment, my body bruised and battered, my clothing smouldering yet intact. I had survived my fall.

I forced myself onto my elbows and looked about me in utter amazement. It seemed that I had landed upon the deck of a marvellously appointed ship. Before my eyes, a towering mast stood tall, billowing its proud sails under a ferociously hot breeze.

My falcon reached out to me with talons extended and settled upon my arm as I stood slowly. I brushed his singed feathers gratefully even as my eyes swept around me, taking in every detail.

I stood upon brilliantly waxed decks that shone in the blistering yellow glow of the air. The figurehead coiled far above my head with the head of a horned beast.

The ship glided gently through a great flowing river of red flames. The fires licked upon the sides of the ship but failed to set it alight.

“Welcome, Golden One,” a gentle voice sighed from behind me.

I turned and before me stood a tall slender man dressed in a long intricately embroidered black coat.

The man had sparse features set in a starkly lean face, sharp cheekbones, thin nose and deep-set dark eyes. His dark hair, straight as an arrow, fell to his shoulders, melded with the midnight colour of his garb.

I asked him who he was and where we were.

“The tale is a simple one,” the slender man spoke again in that melancholy whisper of a voice. “My people above make me sacrifices I do not need and do not want. I keep their gifts as far

from my kingdom as I may, finding nothing in them to warrant my good favour. But you, honourable one, are truly different. From the moment your body hit my flames, the power within you trembled the walls of my kingdom and called out to me.”

I told the man that I was nothing extraordinary. I told him that I was not an honourable warrior, that in fact I had been about to die feeling only the deepest regret.

“You are wrong,” the man said to me. “You are a warrior not because you fight or kill, but because you see what is missing in you and dare to face it. That is a power worthy of sacrifice to me.”

I understood then. I admit it had taken me some time but I realised then that this strange slender man thought me his sacrifice. Thought to keep me.

I told him I would be no man's sacrifice. That I would submit to no one's will but my own. Upon my arm my falcon reared up on its talons, stretching its wings wide.

The man looked upon me with vague interest. “You will not submit?”

I drew my sword in answer to his question.

Sometimes meaning is revealed to us through our choices, the truth of things having been known to our hearts before it is understood by our brains. That is how it was for me as I stood upon a lake of fire with my sword in my hand. To live was to love and to love required a warrior's spirit, a warrior's willingness to fight and defend what was most sacred. Those times echo throughout our lives. Chances to do good. Occasions to help another. Incidents in which to be noble. And when those opportunities arise, we must seize them. We must rise to their calling, without thought or care for our safety.

I fell upon the man with a warrior's bellow. In battle, awareness faded into the void of instinct. I recall instants only, mere flashes of memory. A swirl of black, the lightning clash of swords, the tossing of the ship upon the waves.

Then my victorious roar.

The slender man knelt upon the glistening decks, his satin coat pooled about him like blood seeping from a wound, my sword against his. His trembling wrist snapped back under the pressure of my steel. The killing blow was mine to take.

Chances to be noble...

I sheathed my sword and in one powerful movement strode across the deck and dived over the side of the ship, head first, into the fiery flames.

I thought to burn but I did not feel the fire, only a pulling force that drew me deep within the fiery waves. When I awoke I lay at the edge of a stream in a quiet wood. I was near frozen from the cold and without food. My falcon lay with me, tucked within my furs. After some wandering, I

came upon this kind woman and her children.

The Tale of the Lady in Yellow

My mother, my siblings and I listened to the last of the Golden One's tales with our candles guttering into wisps of smoke around us. I gazed at the five warriors in wonder. They had seen lands unimaginable, beheld untold riches, witnessed and wielded otherworldly powers. Oh, to be one such as they, instead of a miserable young girl trapped by her circumstances!

The Golden One especially drew me, with her forbidding exterior but most centred soul. Of all the warriors she seemed to me the most worthy of the title, the most noble. I fancied that as she told her tale, she seemed aware of my presence in the doorway and glanced in my direction. Perhaps it was a trick of the firelight but I could have sworn that her dark countenance grew warm and kind whenever her eyes lit upon mine.

“If we may, kind hostess,” the Heroic One addressed himself to my mother, “but pass the night here? We will leave tomorrow at day break.”

My mother acquiesced to their request and as we slept in the little room that was more like an alcove with a padded floor, the warriors slept upon blankets and furs laid on the floor of our front room.

In the middle of the night, I awoke with a start. My eyes rose immediately to seek out the form of the Golden One amongst the others within the front room. To my surprise, her back was no longer turned towards me. Rather, her eyes met mine across the moon-drenched distance between us.

She looked at me in silence, her expression inscrutable and I gazed back, spellbound.

When she stood, as stealthy as a cat despite her size, and left the cottage, I did not hesitate to follow. My mother and my siblings slept on behind me as I picked my way carefully to the front door. She had left it slightly ajar but I closed it quietly behind me for a chill wind blew and snow swirled in the darkness outside. Her tall shadow beckoned to me out of the darkness and I answered the call.

“You are unhappy here,” she said, “and discontentment colours your every moment in this place. My brothers and I know unhappiness. We know discontentment. Each of us has felt a taste of what you struggle with. Each of us, in our own way, could help you ease your pain. The Silver One desires to make you his bride. He is a good man, a noble warrior, and would be a good husband to you. You could follow him and leave behind all your woes.” The Golden One's eyes burned into mine. “Or you could come with me and face them all in an instant. What I could offer you is

friendship. The brutality of unadulterated truth... I will tell you now what I did not tell my brothers before. I will share my truth with you. I told of the regrets that ate at my soul as I fell to what I was certain was my death, but I did not speak of my sorrow. I did not mention the agony of grief that seared clear what was left of my blindness and ignorance. You see, until that moment I had imagined that my brothers and I were one. As I held them in my hearts, so I believed they clasped me. But I fell and only my falcon followed in pursuit. I fell and watched them flee. It is true that they only followed my own order. And yet, if any of them had been in my place, I tell you now that I would have leapt after them in an instant. That they did not, awakened me from the dream of belonging. I had been outside all along. Now at least, I know it. Do you see the nature of true awareness? It is the exquisite agony of a cleansing fire.”

I felt a sudden quietness settle both within and all around me. The night seemed strange, charged with the intentness of a thousand ears straining to listen. The wind sighed, a weary gasp as hollow as a bated breath. I was being offered all my dreams coalesced into a single magical word: choice. I could choose anything, go anywhere. I could be someone else. Away from poverty and hunger and want. Away from difficulty. Away from strife.

And in an instant, I knew. Though the Golden One drew me with her magnetic aura, her words stirred the deepest fears within me into a fever pitch. What she described was agony. I did not want fire. I wanted escape. I wanted...

“I choose the Silver One, if he will have me.”

The Golden One only looked at me as I spoke and for a moment after. She nodded once. “You have answered me and I must obey.”

She left me standing and retreated into the house. I waited with my back to the door and my heart in my throat, my eyes frozen on the cold silver orb dangling, like a brooch, upon heaven's midnight robe.

I heard the door open carefully behind me and could not contain the smile that spread across my face. I did not need to turn around to know that the Silver One had come for me.

And when he asked me, there was no pause in my soul, no fear in my heart. This path was unmarked by danger. There was only...

“Yes.”

You will think me beyond foolish. I was not. Bitterness ages a soul and I was an ancient being. I knew the world in which I lived and what I wanted from it. This man, this Silver One was my destiny and my salvation, I was certain of it. My soul cried out for his honour and decency, like a parched traveller in a vast desert. He would complete me. Pad out my empty spaces with his strength. I could float along in his ebb with my eyes closed to the flames that lapped on the horizon.

When I awoke my mother and told her my wishes, she wept and declared that I had gone mad. She cursed the warriors for entering her home and impinging upon her generosity. For distracting her with tales and nonsense while working stealthily to steal her daughter's heart. My mother begged me to reconsider, to think of her for a moment. To have mercy on her, how could our family survive without me? To forgive whatever transgressions she had committed that had so turned me against her.

I was sick of her clinging. Tired of being needed. Her grief was too heavy for me, it turned me cold. Think of me what you will but I must speak the truth. I hated her in that moment.

"I don't want to think of you," I hissed the words in her face, "I want to think of myself. You don't care for me, you only want an obedient servant. One child would do as well as another for your needs. Well, you shall have one, mother. I promise you my first born." I ignored how she shrank from me and scorned the steady fall of her tears with each thoughtless word I spoke.

I never told the Silver One how acrimoniously my mother and I had parted ways. He was a good soul and it would have upset him to have left things so badly between us. So, I pretended that nothing bothered me and packed my meagre possessions quickly. By the time first light broke over the horizon, the Silver One was pulling me up into the saddle in front of him and unwittingly dragging me free of the chains that had bound my life to that place and those people. We rode away with the other warriors on their mounts beside us. I rode with the Silver One's arms around me and knew for the first time, a man's touch. And soon, I would be alone with him as the other four warriors pursued their own destinies elsewhere.

Having accomplished what The Order had asked of them and being free to do as they pleased until they were called upon again, each was eager to be gone and begin anew.

I could not help myself as I watched the Golden One raise an arm in farewell, feeling the weight of those quiet dark eyes upon me. "Where will you go?" The Silver One held our horse firm and waited patiently as I spoke.

The Golden One smiled.

At me? At all of us? I could not be sure.

"Where I was always going."

It was the Silver One's warm breath against my ear that unravelled the mystery of the Golden One's words as I watched her ride away, her falcon streaking through the sky above. "She is going home, my beloved."

Home... Beloved... I would have both with my Silver warrior, I vowed myself, and think no more of what could have been.

And I am happy to say that we were able, for a time at least, to make a good life for

ourselves. The Silver One's spirit calmed mine, softened its hard shell and, over time, I began to regret how cruelly I had spoken to my mother, how heartless I had been when I left her. My heart eased towards my mother as age increased my wisdom and insight. I began to dream of her, seldom at first until, at last, she became a nightly intruder in my dreams. I would wake with longing, heavy as lead, settled upon my heart. Finally, as I began to grow great with child, the stirring I had felt to reunite with her blossomed into a nigh-on overwhelming compulsion.

I wrote to her. I told her what had become of me, how I regretted our parting, how I would soon have a child of my own. That I had been a fool, that I desired to make amends.

The seasons passed in an agony of waiting, yet her response did not come, and all the while the child within me grew a little more with each passing day. Just when I had all but given up hope of hearing from my mother, I received her letter and fell upon the missive with the desperation of a starved creature. I read her words, recoiled in violent anguish and doubled over as my waters burst and spilled down my legs.

You promised me your first born. I await the child destined to become my own.

I hurled the letter into the fireplace, cursing my mother's foolishness at the top of my lungs even as I bore down in childbirth. My pains had begun so suddenly that the Silver One could not even fetch the midwife and instead was called upon to catch the babe that practically leapt into his arms.

I delivered a beautiful little girl, and though I should have been happy, I was not. My mother's letter had badly unsettled me. I feared to lose my child, and would not have her a second away from me. I also hesitated to explain my fears and the reasons for them to my husband, for to do so would have required me to reveal my own transgressions against my mother. And I could not bear for him to know such things about me, I so hated to disappoint him.

My obsession with the daughter of my heart grew more severe with each passing day. As my child bloomed into a wonderful infant, the terror of losing her only gripped me more firmly.

But you cannot fight fate. You cannot keep what is ill-gotten. It was cruelty to my mother that gained me a happy family of my own. I had committed a grave sin in stealing another's happiness to supplement my own. The scales of virtue had tipped against me on that day and I have learned since that nature abhors an imbalance. I had written my own fate, so I had done and so I would have done unto me..

The Golden One had once offered me cleansing fire and purified redemption. I understood the true value of such things only when it was far too late to choose awareness.

So it was that on the fifth year of her birth my daughter was borne away from me by the hands of fate. I awoke one day and she had gone. No trace that she had ever been. Had it been a dream? My Silver One, even with his keen mind and loving heart, could not remember her. I began to think myself insane. My husband, knowing the value of inner reflection and wisdom, took me to the wilderness to recover myself. When I emerged three days later, I knew that I could not stay with the Silver One and pretend that my daughter had never been. My heart knew what it had lost, and I meant to find her again. I went in search of my mother thinking to find them together, but they have eluded me to this very day. But I searched every day without fail, until this very day for the child that I lost...

However, I feel that though you have heard my tales, you do not know me. Your eyes though kind, hold no recognition for me. Your heart has not answered. Neither of us is whom the other was hoping to find.

The sun is rising and our tales for the night are complete. But your journey must go on. Through my green door and down the winding path. The wilderness hides what you must seek. May you find what your soul desires. May you find your beginning.

The Girl Who Awoke

Another path to traverse, another key to find, another magical journey home, down another path, through one gate and to another.

The girl stands, feeling the sun upon her skin, her fingers tight around the new intricate key she wears on a second chain around her neck. The key lifts from between her breasts, slips into the lock of the great gate and turns. The gate draws open with a gentle nudge.

The girl enters. It is dark for just a moment before a cool flickering light suffuses the air around her.

She is in a small bedroom. On one wall, a line of floor to ceiling mahogany wardrobes, on the other a twin bed with rumpled sheets. A stack of notebooks litters the floor. Journals. Diaries. Secret chronicles.

The windows in the room are large. Open.

She goes to them and pulls back the gauzy curtains.

It must be dawn. The world just now awakening. The sun rubbing sleep from her eyes.

There is something sharp and clear and new about the air. As yet unsullied.

Bird song greets her ears. A vast wall of trees flutters before her eyes. Flowers preen themselves in rainbow shades amid carefully manicured beds. A high brick wall encloses everything

like an embrace.

The feeling is one of seclusion and safety. It lulls her into relaxing, despite the breeze stealing past her. Despite the fact that it is cold. Colder than one would expect for all the flowers in full bloom.

Somewhere in the distance someone is sweeping. The sharp, satisfying scratch of a broom being dragged vigorously over watered asphalt.

She pulls away from the window and pads across the room, chased away from her perch by an especially frigid wind. The wooden door opens under her hands. A corridor, her door is only one of seven.

One of the doors is not like the others. Etched glass, wooden frame. It swings wide.

And there to her right, so suddenly it steals her breath.

A shape shrouded in a long woven cotton blanket with thickly embroidered edges. The white silhouette is framed in a doorway, utterly still, contrasting sharply with the sights and colours outside. Beyond the shape, stairs slope down to a driveway, to more flower beds, short fat palm trees, tall hedges separating out and walling in secret places, the vast panorama of a purple and orange sky.

The form stands perfectly still in the crisp air, arms raised, palms out.

In surrender? Sincerity? Supplication? In the act of giving?

The girl cannot be sure. All she knows for certain is that the sight fills her with a profound sense of tenderness. Of being cradled and adored. Of being treasured: absolutely, without question and forever. Of belonging to someone and some place. Of having that someone and that some place belong to you too. She is seized by the urge to reach out, to join in, to be one with this scene. With this figure that is so serene yet so rooted to the earth. Standing at the gates like a sentinel.

The girl takes a step forward. Reaches out a hand.

So close.

She can feel living warmth emanating from the blanket.

Her fingertip brushes cotton.

III. Temperance

Sometimes we regress with age. The idea is to grow but too often life shrinks us. We change from who we once were, still not quite who we will be. The middle point is tedious. Burdened by urges, hopes and fears. She tells me I used to be calmer. What happened to me then? I try to pinpoint the time of change. I trace it back three years. I could not say with certainty when but I remember very clearly how. The change has stages, like mourning. The first is to suffer shock and confusion. The second: to grow weary. The third: to become angry. The fourth: to lose all patience. The fifth: to lose yourself. I wouldn't awake from my trance until a year after my change. Then I looked upon the path I had taken and realised that the road back would be long and fraught with danger. Life can be like that sometimes. It bombards you, becomes unbearable. Too much beauty, too much grief. It is an ocean, lapping gently upon placid shores, then a raging storm with crashing waves. It is too easy to get sucked to the heart of life's vortex and too difficult to break free once captured. This has been my experience, at least, and as the years pass I see so many others circling around me. Their faces lost in the ocean spray, their bodies spiralling helplessly closer to destruction. As a child I circled gently near the shores, like the furthest planets from the sun, caught in a rhythm that never gave a hint of the dangers just beyond. She was of that place. I still imagine Her as a giant, though age has shrunk Her too. The indomitable will of Her form could cleave the waters in twain, smoothing my path behind Her. I wonder now from where that will came? She tells me stories of Her youth and I imagine Her, tiny in form, giant of spirit, eyes always focused far on the horizon, where good things happen and storms are born. Her feet, wide and long, were built for standing up and standing their ground. Her will must come from the very earth itself. She plants Her feet upon the soil and draws the power of the stars and of creation deep within Her. Shields Herself with it against the rain of despair that fells others around Her. Yet sometimes I wonder, is Her power a strength or a weakness? Does She stand, a warrior battling against the vicissitudes of fortune or is She huddled, eyes closed tight against the horror – like a child left alone in the darkness? Either way, She emerges from the fray, uninjured, and strong enough of heart to return again. I wish only that She had shared some of her strength with me. My feet are long, but not wide, they cannot fight the powerful waves and stay steady upon the earth as Hers can. My shield is narrow, I can find no shelter under it. The rain pelts me with the full strength of its anger. I spin hopelessly in the vortex, happy one moment, in utter despair the next. Reacting to everything, throbbing impossibly with awareness – my breath, the souls around me, all of us hurtling hopelessly, heedlessly towards our end. If you stood before me now, if I had you to tell all my secrets to, I would take you in my arms. I would tell you that the only point of all of this – the sun, the sea, the battles, the graves – is to

teach us to be humble. To help us understand what is at the true heart of things. And what is at the heart of things? Very little. Do you see? This is life. At the end, it is very little. Never too much. And we must be content with this little thing. This little time, this little sadness and equal grief, this pain, this pleasure, this beauty, this ugliness. We must have hope, but not too much. We must be glad but not forever. We must cry, but soon dry our tears. We must love, but not too hard. We should occasionally take life seriously, but sometimes we ought to laugh in its face. See? Very little. A little of everything, gently, without force, and suddenly you are no longer spinning, about to be pulled under. You begin to drift to the quiet edges of the dying storm. When the water is no longer churning in frothing waves about your eyes, you can begin to see the view. It stretches wide and long. To the edges of the horizon and, if you peer even harder, beyond. The sky is laid bare. Wide open, brilliantly clear. Silence impregnates the twilight with the sublime. That is life, should you understand how to seek it. I have been one of the lost ones. Those sad souls who did not see or saw too late, those lazy souls who saw and did not care to act, those ineffectual souls who saw and could not change. That girl I once met, who awoke not knowing, was at least seeking to learn. This is what makes heroines. The seeking. There must be a journey. And gently we must traverse it. This is a dedication to that girl and to what she seeks: If my letters are ever found. If strange eyes are ever to traverse these, the honest leanings of my heart, then let it be said that I am no longer lost. Let them understand, that I was poised at the mouth of the void, that I looked deep into its blazing light and drew myself back from the abyss. This is not a tragedy. I am a woman, grown and sprung from the edges of disaster, emerging on the other side to a journey I was finally willing to take. I can say this proudly: I have sought and in the seeking, found.

The Girl Who Awoke

A girl awakes and this time, she knows. This day shall be like all the others.

She wanders to the lake and stands with the morning breeze flitting over her bare skin. She awaits a letter in a bottle. It arrives. She awaits a boat. It arrives.

She expects a woman to greet her. A woman does and she is led into yet another cottage and to the centre of the main room. To a beautiful fire set in a circular pit.

The woman urges the girl to sit before the fire, takes the seat opposite and retrieves a little silken purse from the floor. She draws apart the pouch's drawstrings to reveal a shimmering pile of gold dust. She takes a fistful of the iridescent powder and tosses it upon the flames, causing the fire to roar and crackle with violent rebirth. Her hand rests upon the emerald silk of her robe, coated and glittering and streaking her lap with gold.

“I am glad you have come,” she said, her voice gentle and imbued with warmth. “I am thankful that you have answered my call. Your presence is good for me. I have spent far too much time alone and long for company. Perhaps you are the one I have been waiting so long for?”

The Tale of the Lady in Green

I was born in a kingdom perched high atop a steep and jagged mountain. We towered so high up that, often, the clouds would hover below our feet. The air there was cold and clear. The sun would blaze in summer and slumber through the winter snows. The forests around my mountain kingdom were thick and rife with flowers as big as ceremonial platters. The dark, mist-shrouded forests stood as a barrier between our world and those of our Gods. All year round that most sacred place would beat down with steady rain and resound with the chirps and roars of unseen wild beasts. But for the few days allowed by our faith, my people were forbidden from entering into the forests, for the place was that of magic and the other world, far too dangerous for mortal beings. We went to the forest only to deliver our offerings when the Gods allowed it. To burn incense and make sacrifices for the great and terrible beings within.

As a child I brought only heartache and trouble to my mother. I did not have the focus to listen to her when she instructed me, the patience to complete the tasks she assigned me, nor the decency to care that I failed her. I viewed her with the ambivalent detachment of a stranger. I felt that we did not belong to one another, or perhaps more honestly, that I was not hers. That the humble, simple little woman whom I called mother should have birthed me seemed the height of madness. We were so different, she and I. And a constant disappointment to one another. I took to wandering from home to be free of her and I would run the streets of the kingdom until my bare feet were shredded and left bloody prints upon the paving stones. I would walk amongst the market stalls, chatting to all who would spare me a moment of their time. I danced and talked to myself in the fields till I collapsed with exhaustion and fell asleep within the trembling cage of the tall lemon-scented grass. My mother's urges to slow down, to stay close, to calm my spirit seemed to me an effort to destroy the very fabric of my being. Why be slow when one could be fast? Why be miserable with obligations when one could be happy and fancy free? Why work when one could play? I would ask her these questions and watch my mother's face crease with distress. And sometimes, I fancied, even fear. In my youth I had imagined that it was my rebellion that sparked such terror in her eyes. It was too late by the time I realised that she had been afraid, not for herself, but for me. And she had every reason to be.

When she could not contain me and her fear finally grew uncontrollable, my mother sought

the counsel of a wise old lady who lived a strange and solitary life on the outskirts of our kingdom.

The wise woman's house sagged with age and a strange sense of despair. It seemed to carry the world's burdens upon its creaking beams and looked ready to collapse under the strain. The wise woman awaited my mother and me at the doorway of her home. Her gnarled, twisted form was bent low over a thick cane. Her features were heavily creased but her eyes were sharp, clear and keen. They protruded from her face, bulbous, and seemed to focus in on me like an arrow. I felt the blow of her glance like a fist to my belly. The hair of my arms rose as a strange frisson of fear danced down my spine. I wondered what she had seen when she had looked so deeply inside me?

When my mother greeted her and tried to bow into her home, the wise woman stopped her.

"I am sorry, sister," the wise woman said. "But you cannot enter my home." When my mother asked her why, the wise woman responded with her eyes still trained on mine. "Something follows your child and I do not want it in my home. Your daughter is heavy with Others. There is no stillness within her. There is no peace. She will not rest until she has found the means to her own destruction and followed it. And in so doing she will drown us all in her wake. Her misfortune will swallow all those foolish enough to remain near her."

When my mother began to weep, I grew angry. She would believe anything of me! She did not know me at all! I ran from her.

My feet, used to the modulations of the earth, were fast and steady.

My heart throbbed with anger, with resentment.

I ran unthinking, blinded by tears, headlong into the sacred forest. I knocked over an altar in my hurry and the offerings tumbled like tears to the earth. I wove in amongst the thickly grown trees, dancing with the shadowy shapes in the mist.

I could hear my mother stumbling after me in the wilderness, calling my name, sobbing, her voice growing quieter, until finally, I had lost her.

I stopped running.

My heart was still thundering in my ears. My gasping breaths thundered over the gentle sound of the lightly drizzling rain. My breaths swirled the mists that hovered like incense over the scene. I began to walk. Slowly, my breaths quieted and I could hear the sounds of the forest settling around me. It felt as though it were sealing me in, closing over the gaps and tracks my body had made in the foliage.

I began to regret the whim that had led me to run into the forest. I turned around, then back again. Confused and, yes, a little frightened.

I could not recall which way I had come.

I heard a snap of a twig behind me and a roar echoing from somewhere in the distance. I

hurried my steps. I was nearly running again when I suddenly emerged into a clearing.

I stopped so suddenly I nearly catapulted myself forward into the dirt. I eased quickly behind a tree and peeked back out into the clearing.

While the forest's air was still and cloaked with fog, in the clearing the air whipped with a crisp breeze. But it was not only the change in atmosphere that had brought me to such a stop. Rather, it was the man.

He sat upon a rock, at the edges of the clearing, by a still lake. Dressed in magnificent garb he sat with a sword across his knee, sharpening it with long smooth strokes of a stone.

"I have seen you." His voice was calm and low. It coaxed me from my hiding place and out into the clearing.

I stood before him, with my clothes ruined, my skin scratched till bleeding. I stood and stared, unable to do otherwise. My heart, this time, did not slow.

"You have crossed into a world that is not your own," he said to me. "How have you come to do so?"

I told him what had taken place, how I had come to be in the forest. I told him that I was lost and begged him to help me find my way home.

The man looked at me in silence for a moment, his dark eyes assessing. "There is no peace within you," he nodded. "The wise woman of your world is correct. Even now, you do not think of your mother, who searches for you still. Your heart beats for something new. Something better. The past is already forgotten."

He smiled then and I lost my breath along with my memory.

"I am the Lord of the Winds and I have seen and know much of your world," he said to me. "If you will follow me and be a guest in my home for this night, I will tell you what I know and show you what I have seen."

I think back on that night and wonder if I had gone insane. I do not think I would have the courage to follow him now. I have seen too much in my long life to be so brave, but then, I followed him willingly and without one moment given over to fear. I followed him because he was magnificent, because he would share his knowledge, because going with him meant not going back, but mainly because he was unknown to me. A wonder.

The Lord of the Winds led me through the forest, and it parted to let him pass. In the distance before us towered a strange and marvellous structure. A wall of stone, a giant mountainside carved with two gaping caves, one on top of the other. The Lord gestured in the direction of the uppermost cave.

"That is my home," he said, "and the one below it belongs to my brother, the Lord of

Death.”

I began to quell at his words but did not even think to flee from him.

We scaled the mountainside together, ascending a tall and steep staircase. I feared to tumble to my death and walked with my hands braced against the mountain face for safety. Finally we reached his cave and entered it.

It was a breathtaking space. The inside of the cave had been carefully and artfully hollowed out over millennia by strong winds. Purples, reds, browns and pinks swirled in patterns upon the stone walls. The floor was gently sloping. Everything was perfectly smooth to the touch.

Strange creatures, with the aspect of large green toads and the bodies of children bustled busily in the depths of the cave, amongst a great collection of pots and cauldrons. Their great throats swelled grotesquely over human shoulders, while their thin arms moved in a blur of busyness. They seemed to be cooking a great feast, but as one of the toads lifted the lid of a boiling pot a great storm issued from it, raining a deluge upon the creature as he stirred the mixture and finally resealed the lid. I understood in that instant that what they prepared was not food but rather the weather itself.

The Lord sat upon a windswept throne of carved stone and gestured for me to take the identical seat by his side. Together we gazed out of the cave and into the forests beyond.

“From my seat upon this throne,” The Lord began to speak, “I observe the world and all within it. I scour the face of your kingdom and those all around it, looking for souls to take to my brother. In watching and waiting I have seen and learned much that it would do you good to hear.”

The Lord of the Winds and the Slippery Earth

Life can be dull when one has too much power. I learned this lesson when your earth was still young in the time of five suns. My brother and I live here in the north while my cousins are scattered far to the south, east and west. My work is to gather souls. It is a hard and thankless task. Too often it is accompanied by sadness, too rarely have I been met with joy. It seems my winds drift more over battlefields than they do through the windows of the bedridden old. I have seen worlds being born and I have watched them die. I have long since become numb to the experience. If I can bear that then you will understand when I tell you that the death of one soul no longer means anything to me. No more than a dying flame to you. So, my life grew weary. I did not care for the things around me. What value one life when I was responsible for thousands of them being extinguished in a matter of moments?

I know I do not look it but I am old. As ancient as the suns and earth who birthed me. And

there was a time when I was just as weary. A time when I had grown weary of living. Of existence itself.

One day I happened to sit as I am today upon my throne, listlessly observing the worlds, yours and mine, spread out before me. I do not know what began it but all of a sudden I was awash with loneliness and regret. I longed to care again, for my being, my presence in this realm to matter. Even Lords, you see, desire to become more than they once were.

I determined to leave my world. To journey far from my jungle kingdom and live amongst the mortals of your world. I crossed the jungle, following my western-bound cousins until I emerged from my kingdom into the human one. I walked for a long time until I came upon a small village near a rushing stream. I entered it, announcing my presence as I had seen others doing so many times before.

I told the villagers that I was lost, a weary traveller separated from his companions. I asked them for food and shelter.

To my surprise, they gladly gave it. The villagers seemed happy and content. They lived spare and simple lives but ones that brought them pleasure. There were hunters, leaders, wise elders and seers among the villagers but the people who seemed to be the most respected were the craft masters. Within the village there were five people who had each mastered a good and honourable craft. Though others learned under them, these five were much sought after for their particular skills.

As the days passed, I began to admire and respect the mortals of the village for their dedication to living. They struggled constantly against the whims of the Gods, the violence of the seasons, the trials of existence, and yet they continued to greet each day as a new beginning. I envied them their enthusiasm and, over time, determined to stay and learn how it was that they had managed to live in such an inspiring way. I asked the village leaders if I could remain amongst them and live my life as a member of their community. After much deliberation, it was rarely that an outsider petitioned to settle in their midst, they acquiesced to my request and I was allowed to stay.

As I did not want to reveal that I was not of their world, I worked as hard as any mortal to fit in and to make my place in their village. Needless to say, I struggled with everything, and accomplished nothing. I could not even build myself a shelter, nor provide food for myself, nor make clothes to replace the ones I had arrived in. I realised very quickly that I would need the help of the village craft masters if I was ever to survive as a human being. The first craft master I met was the Builder, the second was the Farmer, then the Earthenware Maker, the Needleworker and, finally, the Basket Weaver. Each of the people was gifted at their particular art. Their craft underpinned the village's strengths, saw to its survival. Each of the craft masters was essential to the

people around them, just as they would prove to be invaluable to me.

I lived for some time in the village in a strange state of bliss. Everything seemed new to me. To replace my earlier reticence was a new and bubbling excitement. I was enraptured by all their mundane realities. To run in pursuit of prey through the trees, to fish by the stream, to sit before my cooking fires within my wonderful new home, became my ultimate pleasures. I suppose I was lost in the newness of it all. Either that, or for the first time during my aeons of existence, I gave of my actual self and was paid back in kind by others. It was a strange and marvellous feeling. To need and be needed. I was so deeply in love with what I had seen of the village that for a long time I did not look beyond the surface of things. Slowly, however, the new and marvellous became the mundane and commonplace. What had once distracted me with its beauty could no longer even draw my glance. I was settling back down again and I felt it with a keen sense of disappointment. I fought this feeling, I did not want to return to the way I had been before. I did not want again to feel as I had when sitting upon my lonely throne. But it could not be helped. My old nature was reasserting itself with a vengeance.

My eyes began to clear and I began to see things as they truly were. I saw that all was not perfect in my little village. The town itself, once rustic and romantic, now seemed ramshackle and defeated. The people, once so full of life and happiness, now seemed petty and spiteful. I began to really listen to the words they uttered. I realised that they spoke of each other, not humorously as I had thought, but rather in cruel judgemental terms.

I began to grow disenchanted with the villagers, with the village itself. Before long, I had decided to return to my home beyond the forest. There did not seem any point in staying where I was when I was growing unhappier by the day. I had actually begun to think with yearning of my world and of returning to my dominion.

Finally, one day as the birds signalled the dawn, I looked for a last time upon my home and prepared to return to my forest. I was walking from my house when a shout ripped through the early morning silence. It was an agonised, blood curdling yell. It blossomed from the south of the village, near the edge of the stream.

I began to run towards it. My old spirit called out to me and I moved with the swirling winds, unaware even that I did so. I arrived upon the scene and was surprised to find more than one person by the side of the stream. I approached the group and sighed to see the village seer fallen at odd angles upon the earth. She was dressed in her full ceremonial garb, lit like molten gold by the rising sun. Yellow robes, gold headdress, white feathers. I knew in an instant that she had passed beyond. I could taste her soul hovering over her prostrate form. I blew her soul towards my brother's keep. Five people surrounded the seer's broken and lifeless body, the five craft masters,

each with their face twisted by terror and suspicion.

I asked the craft masters what had taken place, having assumed that they had stumbled upon the unfortunate woman, but they surprised me, ignoring my questions and evading my eyes. Finally, my patience worn thin by their strange attitude, I revealed myself to them in my natural state. I did it suddenly, savagely, hoping to loosen their tongues and shock the words from their reticent lips.

Before I could judge the success of my transformation, more villagers began to arrive. Soon the banks were crawling with people, young and old, woman and man. They clustered, frightened and angry, around the body of their fallen comrade. That she was a woman of considerable power and yet could still meet with such a fate only frightened the villagers even more. For what sort of murderer could cloak their actions from one who saw all?

My presence soon captured the attention of the villagers. They did not seem to know where to look first or indeed what to be shocked by first – the corpse of their seer or the revelation that the Lord of the Winds had been living secretly amongst them.

I ignored them, for my interest in the village and its people had been rekindled and was focused entirely on the five craft masters standing around me. I was sure that they were the only ones who could have witnessed the seer's death. It was even possible that the killer was amongst them. Yet, they all stood before me as dumb as statues, unwilling to speak.

I asked the village elder to keep the craft masters apart, to keep anyone from speaking to them and asked them to be sent to me one by one.

I returned to my house and waited there for the first craft master to arrive. When she entered my home, I stood to greet the Master Builder. She seemed altered from when I had seen her last, when she had come to help me build my own home. She could not meet my eyes.

I asked her to sit and to tell me what she had seen by the stream.

What the Builder Saw

I was born many moons ago within this very village, as were my parents before me and their parents before them. My roots are here, generations of my blood have filled the sacrificial chalices. This earth, this soil is within me. I sprouted from it. It is all I know and all I am. I am a builder, also by blood.

Helping to shelter the souls of this village has been the work of my ancestors as far back as the bards can recall. I build today as my ancestors built before me so long ago. We use the same fibres to twine rope, the same leaves to weave into walls, the same wood to construct the shape. Even the shape is of significance to me and my people. They are built to ascend us to the heavens.

You stand before me, a Lord, but an outsider none the less. You cannot understand our ways, the desires that drive us. You cannot know the battles of the human heart. Allow me to say that, for it needs to be said, but know that I am an honourable woman. I have no secrets that are too shameful to share. I will tell you all I have seen today because I do not want to sully my good name with suspicion.

I awoke this morning before the sun rose, as is my custom. I swept my house, prepared the food to break our fast, and awoke my children. I washed and fed my children, then awoke my husband. It is not the season of the hunt, so he sleeps later and does less than ever. He did not eat the meal I prepared for him but left immediately to join in with the other men in their...activities. I kept my peace and after preparing our noon meal, went down to the river with a basket of washing before going about my work. I carried my basket to the river's edge and began soaping my things. Some clothes and some pots and pans. I heard a shout and went to see what had happened. I saw the Farmer standing upon the grass near the stream, hands clasped to his mouth and beneath him, the body of the seer. It was only then that I noticed the other craft masters around me. I have no idea why they were there. For that information, you have to ask them.

I have no idea what happened to the seer. She was a strange and secretive woman. I had no cause to seek her wisdom. I knew what my future held: more of the same. She had her life and I had mine and our paths rarely had cause to cross.

But I will tell you one thing, I did have a strange confrontation with the woman some time ago. It was at the time that our village prepares for its ceremonial hunt, when young boys become men in a right of passage. The seer was standing in her resplendent golden robes, bright with feathers and jewellery. I met her eyes across the space, inclined my head in polite greeting and was set to go my way. It was then that I realised that she was coming towards me. She cut through the crowd, her steps sure and solid for one so old, her eyes fixed upon my form. I will tell you true that it froze my blood within me. I thought of fleeing but soon realised that I had waited too long to move. The seer had reached me.

The woman must have been mad. She was frantic, nearly frothing at the mouth. Her words were garbled, indistinguishable from animal sounds. Then, in a moment, she was transformed, staring over my shoulder as though in a strange and powerful trance. Her eyes seemed beset by clouds.

“I have seen you,” her voice was snarling, low, vibrating. Her long fingers, like talons, clawed out across the distance between our chests. “I have seen you in my dreams.”

So saying, the seer leapt upon me with her tattered yellow nails outstretched towards my eyes. She was breathing hard, gasping the word 'death' with every breath. I do not know what

compelled the seer to act in such a way. Why she would turn on me so suddenly baffled me then, and does still.

She would not release me until other villagers came to my rescue. They pulled her off me and led her away. As you can imagine, after that incident I had even less desire to be near the madwoman than before. I have avoided her from that day until this unfortunate one.

Let me speak honestly, honourable Lord of the Winds. It is not I who you should examine so searchingly with those suspicious eyes. I hate to speak ill of my companions in craft, but let me tell you true that each of those others has more reason than I to wish harm upon that poor demented old lady. The seer was a powerful woman but she was not much loved in our village. She frightened many.

For example, it is well known within the village that the Basket Weaver and the seer are no great friends. In fact, the Basket Weaver blames the seer for making a false prophecy that led to the downfall of her great family.

That is all I have to say, my Lord. I will call the master Farmer to come to you next.

What the Farmer Saw

Good Lord of the Winds, I wish you to know first of all, that I am innocent of any crime. You will see the truth of this in the telling of my tale.

I am a simple man. I do not know many things, but there is one thing I understand better than any other man or woman in this village. That thing is farming. I know which seeds to plant in which season, I know when to harvest, how to battle infection in the plants. I know which plants cure sickness, which ones aid digestion. I have journeyed to the very edges of this land to find new herbs, vegetables and fruits to plant and grow. The only land that remains a mystery to me is the forest in which you and your illustrious kind make your home. I am an adventurous man, but I am not foolish. I have no wish to anger the forest Gods, no desire to break our natural laws.

I am an honest believer. I worship the Gods carefully, I observe all the holidays. I make sacrifices to the memory of my ancestors and honour their spirits. I also used to visit the seer regularly, in order to make sure that my actions were in keeping with what fate had destined for me and what the Gods willed.

I have known the seer from childhood. My mother told me that the old woman even foretold my birth. My mother used to take me to the seer often when I was young. I would run about the woman's house, playing with her feathers, peering inside her many earthenware jugs full of powders and potions. The seer was a strange and marvellous creature to me then. Even old when I was

young. She was frightening and imposing but kind to me all the same. Not that she played with me or entertained me, mind, that was simply not her way. But she did not censure me for investigating her things, nor bellow at me to keep away from her as she did to so many others. I may have been wrong, but I took that to mean that she must have harboured some affection for me.

After my mother died, I took to visiting the seer on my own. My wife, Gods preserve her, is a good woman but her faith, sadly, is not as strong as mine. It does not concern her if the beasts roar an ominous warning or an evil cloud speaks of ill fortune. She does not think to consult the seer before undertaking travel or large changes. My wife, I am sorry to say, has no fear of the sacred. It is her one fault. Otherwise, she is an excellent wife and mother and a great helper to my work.

Everything went on much the same until, I must admit, a few days ago when I had a strange experience. I had gone early to consult the seer on a matter of great importance to me. If you must know what it concerned, it was to do with my son. The boy is very sick and I wished to consult the seer as to what to do. I knocked as I always do and waited for her to allow me admittance. Only silence greeted me. Finally, seeing that her door was ajar, I let myself in and walked into her house calling her name. I saw her in the corner of the room, her back towards me. When I called to her, she began to turn towards me. There was a strangeness in her bearing, alerting me to the fact that something was very wrong. I tell you honestly, the hair rose up on my neck. When the seer finally faced me, I saw that her eyes had gone milky white. Her face seemed loose and vacant.

“I have seen you,” the woman cried. “I have seen you in my dreams. I have seen the beasts that haunt you. The beasts you have unleashed upon me.” She flew at me suddenly, nearly hurling me to the ground with her shocking strength. I fought her, with my hands around her wrists, as she strained her crooked fingers at my eyes and face. “Death,” the seer screamed in my face, spraying spittle. “Death!” I threw her off and scrambled to my feet. I fled from the house to the sound of her screaming that one word. Over and over again. *Death...* It echoed behind me and pounded through my ears.

I have not been to see her since. I did not know what caused the change in her and, I admit, I was not eager to find out. I was too scared to return after that.

So this has been my life until now. I am not a man who very much likes change. I enjoy habit. Every day is much the same as the one before, or at least as close as I can make it. I awake in the morning to the food my wife has cooked. I fetch some wood or water as my wife needs it. Then I set about my work. This morning I was to turn the soil and do some weeding.

I love my work and do not like to be late in starting it. So you can understand that I was a little angry that my wife waited, unusually, until I had started my work to ask me to go to the stream and fetch some water. I had sold some produce to the Earthenware Maker and was just digging my

first plot. I reprimanded her quite severely for throwing askew my morning schedule, but what could I do? I had no option but to set out with a pair of earthenware jugs strapped to a pole to fill with water.

As I neared the stream, rushing so I could return to work sooner, I thought I heard some murmurings further ahead of me. I am sure I heard voices, but I admit that over the sound of my own laboured breathing, the creaking of my jugs on the pole and the sound of the rushing water, I cannot be sure whether they were men's or women's or even children's for that matter.

I heard a shout just as I rounded the corner to the stream. There, ahead of me, was the crumpled body of the dead seer. The Basket Maker, the Earthenware Maker and the Needleworker all appeared around the collapsed body just as I did.

As we stood gazing down upon the dead woman, the Builder emerged from the bushes further down stream and joined us. Let me tell you, that woman looked very suspicious indeed – bathed in sweat, eyes dark and alive with some inner turmoil. It is well known that I was not alone in my strange altercation with the seer...it is said that the Builder suffered a similar attack...

It is a sad case, is it not, when people lose their faith and resort to murder?

Anyway, that is all I have to say, my Lord. I will call the master Earthenware Maker to come to you next.

What the Earthenware Maker Saw

These other people, my Lord, they are not like you or I. They call themselves hunters and craft masters but they are no such thing. I am the only one of any real use around here. My jugs fetch and boil the water, hold the food, preserve the meats and vegetables. Everything is possible, life itself is possible here because of what I do. Mind you, I am not saying that they are not good people. Far from it. They are good, if a little simple.

As you can gather, I have not always lived here. I was born here but was, fortunately, taken away when I was quite young. Some travellers took a liking to me and taught me all they knew. I returned here only because they grew old and there was no one else to take care of me. I arrived in this place to find that my father had passed away and only my mother remained. My mother taught me her craft, that of earthenware making. I took to it naturally. It was in my blood, after all. I became very good at my craft and before long I was a master. Have you seen the little jugs with sealed lips? I am the first to make them in all the land. They preserve foods even in the heat of summer.

Often though, I found that my heart was not in my work. I would think of the life I had

known before. It had been a good one. I had seen the most wondrous sights. I longed for them again. I was too good for this place, with its superstition and strangeness. I did not belong here. It felt like I was being punished for some crime I was unaware of committing. Had I dealt somebody an unforgiving blow? I could not recall it but I must have done some wrong because my current suffering was very real indeed.

The elders advised me to take a wife. They told me that, since my mother had died, they had found me too solitary. They said that it was not good for a man to mope. To fritter away his time into nothing, with no children nor wife. But how could I choose from such women? The village women were grotesque to me. Ignorant, ugly and servile. No better than the men. I hated them and they must have known it, for soon it became clear that the antipathy was mutually felt.

You have asked me for the truth, Lord of the Winds, and I will gladly tell it to you. You know that I have no liking for the people of the village, but let me tell you that the person I most despised was the seer herself. She was an evil and twisted woman. A sad remnant of our old ways. She lived on the fear and superstition of others. She traded favours and gained treasures from the sadness and suffering of others. She took advantage of people. I avoided her to the best of my ability but it was not easy to do so. In a village such as ours, where superstition runs rife, it is hard to go to any place or to attend any ceremony without the seer being in attendance. The foolish villagers valued her nonsense to such a degree that she was the guest of honour at many an event. And the crazy old woman loved the attention. I think she was a wily old hag. She knew it was all nonsense but she indulged people's fears for her own personal gain. And why should she be more respected than me? Why should she gain more than I have? Am I not more useful? Am I not more intelligent?

As though she had not insulted me enough with her mere presence, the seer one day even had the nerve to approach me in my home as I worked. I cannot remember the day, I was too upset by her visit to remember much other than what took place during it. That day I had been making only tall thin earthenware jugs as I had a yearning to cut some fresh flowers and had decided that I could do with some vases to display them in after picking them. There was not even a knock upon my door before it was pushed open, and there stood the crazy old seer. Would you believe me if I told you she began to mock me and my new earthenware jugs? The mad woman was raving, her face contorted with strange expressions. It was when she began walking towards me, casually knocking many of my drying jugs over to shatter on the floor, that I leapt to my feet in rage. Yes, and fear also. Her eyes, you see, they were not right.

“I have seen you,” the seer was yelling at me in a mad voice. “I have seen you in my dreams.”

I think she tried to leap at me but, I admit, I cannot be sure. I was already throwing my jugs in her direction. They shattered all around her, some smashing against her narrow little frame. She was still yelling but I could not hear what she said. I was shouting myself by then, begging her to leave, threatening her with more jugs. Finally, she fled from my home but I could hear her shouts fading away into the distance for some time. I still have no idea what she was saying or why she would come into my home to attack me when I had never done anything to her. Maybe this is the price I pay for my skills as a master, people become very envious when there is another better than they. It has been a trouble to me since the moment I returned to this doomed place.

Anyway, the encounter with the seer made me even more wary of the people around me. I grew to be more of a recluse. In the beginning I used to go out to sell my wares, taking them with me to the big monthly markets with the neighbouring villages or to people's homes. But after the incident with the seer I grew weary of the task. To walk until my feet were bloody, to talk until my mouth was dry, to carry until my back was bent, all to please people I held in the strongest contempt. My life had become one of pointless routine. A farce.

I began to avoid the markets. I worked from sun up until sun down and no further. They did not deserve more from me. I made what I felt was needed and those who wanted my wares would come to me to buy them if they so pleased. I no longer cared to beg their custom. I stopped leaving my house little by little. Soon, I had organised my life so that I had only to leave my house once every ten days, just to buy food from the farmer, to fetch water to last me and to complete any little tasks that needed doing.

Today was just such a day. I had already returned home from buying my food from the farmer and was leaving again with my water jugs under my arms. I had already bent to fill the first jug when a shout drew me to my feet. I began to run thinking to escape the danger, but in my terror, sadly running straight towards it.

I was so shocked by the sight of the dead seer that it was some time before I noticed the other craft masters around me.

They all looked ruffled and strange to me. I looked at them all as we stood there in a circle around the seer. Some had foreheads sheened with sweat, others had roving eyes and shaking hands. I knew in an instant that something was not right. I knew all of them, you see, had good reason to hate that lamentable old bat. The Farmer, especially, is a strange and superstitious man. I can imagine him getting caught up in some barbaric ritual that ended in the seer's death. But this is only my thinking, you understand, I can never understand the hearts of these people.

That is all I have to say, my Lord. I will call the master Needleworker to come to you next.

What the Needleworker Saw

I try to lead a good life. I never take what is more than my share, and I always give more than I must. I was raised in this village, my family settled here before I was born. I grew up well-loved and well looked after by my parents and the other villagers alike. I used to love running around, helping where ever I was needed. I loved the approval that people gave me when I did something nice for them. The old people would pet me and compliment my good manners, the young would run to accompany me. I loved giving because it seemed to me that I received so much in return.

Both my parents were needle workers. My mother was especially talented with rugs, blankets and clothing and my father loved weaving and repairing fishing nets best. They both passed on their talents to me. It was not easy learning for me though, if I am honest. Studying at my mother's and father's knee was not immediately rewarding, you see, while running to the aid of strangers earned me quick approval and an instantaneous rush of good feeling. Many times my parents would censure me for shirking my duties as their apprentice. As a child I did not listen to them. As a grown woman, I am glad that I did not listen to their words. I have realised that to help others is the height of goodness. How can it ever be bad to give to those in need? To my shame, I have realised that my parents may not have been as good as they could have been. I am glad to say that I am careful to not be as selfish as they were. I give of my belongings, my time, my craft as often as I am asked.

As I give as much as I can, my life is, by necessity, a simple one. I have had to huddle my possessions and restrict my life to a small corner of the large house my father and mother had built to preserve the candles and conserve the heat. It is all I need. It has also allowed me the opportunity to share the things I gained in the trading of my home with the more needy in the village. I gave to the woman whose husband died in the hunts last year and to many others like her. I sewed shredded nets together for the fishermen without pay as well as some clothes for the poorer women's children.

You can imagine how hard life could be at times. It became difficult for me to ask for things in exchange for my work. And, of course, once you have given away something for free it is near impossible to demand money for it during your next encounter with the customer. I began to suffer. I could not afford to eat, I became exhausted with work. With life itself. If I could not trade for things then I would have to get everything by myself. I had to hunt for my own food, make my own earthenware jugs. Nothing was easy for me any more. I struggled to live, day to day, like an animal. And still people asked for help so still I had to give.

The seer was never a part of my life. I did not know her, nor did I have a need to. She was a wealthy woman, though you would never know it to look at her. She was at the heart of things in

the village. She was an oracle and a good luck charm in one.

There was one time, however, that I spoke with the seer. Or rather, a time when she spoke to me. I had just delivered a pile of darned clothing to a poor and old widower when the seer came across my path suddenly. I had been lost in thought and her sudden appearance startled me. The seer was always a strange and frightening woman, but she looked utterly mad on that day. She was wearing her ceremonial headdress even though it was not the occasion for it. Her eyes were rolling about in their sockets, until only the milky whites showed. Spittle flew from her mouth as she grabbed my arm.

“I have seen you,” the crazy woman yelled in my face. “I have seen you in my dreams.”

I fought her grasp on my arm but the woman, though old, was frightfully strong.

“Death. Death. Death!” The woman's crazed voice was shrieking in my ear.

I shoved her to the ground and ran back to my home, her cries echoing behind me, my terror lending wings to my feet. I was certain the seer had confused me with somebody else. What other reason would she have to accost me in such a manner? After all, she did not even know me.

I am glad to say that after that my life returned to normal. I spent every day in much the same way. I have no husband or children, having dedicated my life to others, so I have no one to cause me worry or to care for. I used to wake up early, just as the sun was about to rise. I would tidy my house and break my fast with the orange glow of the rising sun painting my house with its bright, happy light. I used to feel then that life was full of promise. The sun smiled and the rest would fall into place. But the years have passed me by and now I think that life is not born anew with each day. It is, rather, the same single day appearing time and time again, wearing thin and dull with age. It has exhausted me. I awake later now, the sun holds no joy for me. Why awake early, start my day early, begin my troubles early? People would come knocking on my door soon enough, I no longer feel the need to rise early to greet them. I eat what little is left in my house. I do not clean. Again, there is no point in it. Then I start sewing. I begin work first on the things that the people of the village have asked me to do. The things that will earn me no living. I do not want you to think I am unhappy to do these little things for people, it is just that I sometimes wish that they would leave me be. That their demands would cease, even for a moment. But I do not have the heart to tell them no, to leave them in duress. They need help and I am able to give it. It is my duty to give them what little aid I can.

Anyway, today began like any other day. I did my sewing for the village. I repaired a fishing net and a straw mat that had come loose at the edges. I patched some clothes, both my own and those of the villagers. But as I worked, a weight was settling slowly, heavily upon my heart...

Shall I tell you the truth? Can I trust you with my secret?

The truth is that I sat upon my floor for a long time that morning. I stared, nearly dazed, at the pile of work heaped before me. I knew I would not be trading most of my work for personal gain. I knew that I would be working my fingers to the bone but not in any way that would improve my circumstances. And my circumstances are very poor indeed. I can only hope that when I have given everything there is to give, and am left with nothing, that other kind souls will rise up to help me. But sitting there, hunger pinching my belly, my eyes glazed from work and tiredness, I felt bereft. I imagined my life unfurling before me, without change or improvement, with no end in sight.

I made a decision in that moment: to end my pathetic tale of woe. To free myself from the threat of all my tedious tomorrows. I decided to take a little walk to the stream. A walk from which I hoped never to return.

Will you believe I was so happy in that moment? Like an animal that had outsmarted its prey. I was suffused with a sense of calm, contentment, even. I had an answer to life's problem. So simple, so beautiful. The walk to the stream was one of the happiest times of my life.

The moment was destroyed by a shout.

I had just reached the stream. The sound came from near a cluster of plants at the water's edge. I was stumbling towards it when I lost my footing on the slippery bank and tumbled face first to the ground. There, inches from my face, was the strangely contorted body of the seer. The sun glinted against her gilded corpse. The grass was wet with her blood.

My mouth opened to shout, but no sound came. I looked up and saw the other craft masters around me. The Farmer helped me to my feet. We stood looking at the seer then, finally, at each other. I think we all began to wonder about each other, and what we were capable of.

I remember thinking, staring down at the seer's gold-weighted and blood-splattered body, that the dead woman in the scene could so easily have been me. And I was suddenly, desperately glad that it was not. I was glad that she was dead if it meant that I lived. I was glad a tragedy had taken place if it had stopped me from making a terrible mistake. I know how horrible that sounds, Lord of the Winds. I know what a horrible person it makes me to have such thoughts, but seeing death made me desperately want to avoid it. I can say to you now that I wish to live, even if living is difficult.

That is all I have to say, my Lord. I will call the master Basket Weaver to come to you next.

What the Basket Weaver Saw

Honourable Lord of the Winds, I am but a humble basket weaver. These other people may call

themselves masters, but I make no such claim. I do what I can with the little talents I have been given. I do good work and exchange it for the good work of others. I lead a simple life but an honest one.

I, as my family for generations before me, have lived my entire life in this village. I have woven baskets for as long as I can remember. My first memory is sitting upon my mother's knee, my hands bending reeds for her to weave with her nimble fingers. My mother had the most incredible hands, long fingered and fast as lightning. My father used to say I had her hands, that destiny had chosen my fate for me. He used to say that if he had had a son, maybe the boy would have followed him in his work as a fisherman, but I, his daughter, had followed my mother. My father was a good man. He has long since passed on to the other side. It was not the fishing that killed him in the end, as my mother always used to worry would happen when he would be gone through the night. No, my father had died, old and peaceful, in his sleep. My mother still lives, but she is not long for this earth, I am afraid. Her eyes, long used to squinting in the candlelight at her work, are nearly useless now. Her fingers, once so elegant and nimble, are misshapen and frozen stiff with pain.

I spend my days simply. I weave my baskets and I care for my mother. Little occurs to divert me from my usual schedule and I am glad for it. I enjoy my days. I enjoying taking care of my mother as she once took care of me. I love my work and being able to live from it.

My life is good, my Lord, but I should tell you, it could have been better. My family was once the most illustrious in this village and even beyond. My ancestors were once respected and revered as much for their kindness as for the incredible power they bore. They were shamans and holy people, keepers of the old ways. Both my parents would speak of the glory days of my family's past. As my father used to tell me, it was his ancestor who had been one of the founders of our village so many years ago, who had communed with the Gods and found the destined home of our people. My family was made illustrious by their manifold skills but, sadly, all that would end just before my birth.

My family was a devout one and my father told me that his father before him, my grandfather, would visit the village seer for advice before taking any action, great or small. My grandfather believed that it was this caution, this foresight, that had kept our family strong. At that time our village was often at war with the peoples from the valley below. My grandfather was poised to do battle the next day and he went to the seer for her visions of what was to come, so that he might act in accordance with the will of the Gods. In those days our seer was still a young woman, though truth be told, it is possible that she is as old as the world itself. Time holds no sway over one such as she. The seer told my grandfather to avoid the battlefield. She told him that the

war would only bring him grief, and that if he were to join in it, he would bring a great misfortune upon his family for generations to come. My grandfather obeyed her wisdom, although he lost the respect of the other warriors and villagers as a result of his actions.

It would be a fateful decision and one that would end my family's position as one of the first of the village. While my grandfather whiled away his time at home, the warriors who had gone to do battle succeeded in their mission and returned with untold riches. The night the warriors returned, my grandfather and grandmother went out to greet them. They must have left their cooking fires burning. Before long their house was ablaze and it spread quickly to the other houses around it. The villagers did not realise what was happening before it was too late. That night the entire village burned. Everyone blamed my grandfather. He was disgraced, a ruined husk of the man he once was. He was no longer respected, the other warriors considered him to be a coward and an old fool. My father was a young man at this time, he grew into manhood ridiculed and derided for his lost family honour. He never recovered. My father was a good man, but he spent his life with his shoulders hunched and his eyes pinned to the ground whenever he ventured out from his home. Village people have a long memory and even until this very day they look at me strangely, as though I was to blame for the ruin of the old village, as though I should be ashamed of the blood that runs through my veins. They do not dare speak of the past, for they need my baskets, but it is clear that the resentment against my family still lurks within their breasts.

As you can imagine, I am not close to the people of this village. I remain here because it is my right to remain and they will never banish me from my home, the home of my ancestors. I keep to myself. I do what I must, I speak when I must, I meet eyes when I must but, truly, I have no place in my affections for these people. I wish it were not so, but it is not in my power to change or in my heart to forget. I can't help but sometimes wonder, though, how things would have been if the seer's prophecy had not led my family to ruin. If I had not grown up in disgrace. If the villagers had taken the time to know me. Just me. To forget my family, our history, and just see me. But these people were never interested in knowing me for myself. They do not matter anyway, not to me. In truth, I am not angry with the villagers, they are, after all, merely fools stumbling blindly through existence. They are not to blame for my woes. The seer was. It was she who led my grandfather astray. She who gave him such bad advice, and thus led him to his ruin. If I suffer for my grandfather's mistake to this very day, why should the seer be untouched by the same taint?

I will tell you true, great Lord of the Winds, I hated that woman with everything in my soul. Every success the seer has enjoyed has been like a dagger to my heart. She was loved and revered while I was merely tolerated. It burned in my soul.

The day my father died, the last words that left his lips were ones of sadness at the fact that

he was leaving my mother and I unloved in a village that despised our very name. I could not tolerate the situation in silence for another moment after that. I left his deathbed to confront the seer. I went to her house thinking to ask her to issue a proclamation to the village, clearing my family's name. I felt that it was something she should have done of her own volition long before but, as she had not the decency to do so, I would force her to remedy the situation immediately.

I pushed my way into her home without invitation and I tell you, I regret it now, for the woman clearly was not in her right mind. She stood just within the doorway, as though she had been awaiting my arrival. Her claw-like fingers gripped my arms the moment I entered her home. I saw that her eyes were milky white, her teeth clenched and bared in a manic snarl.

“I have seen you,” the seer yelled at me, her grip tight and painful upon my arm. “I have seen you in my dreams.”

I struggled to free myself from her, shouting over her in my panic. I did try to tell her, albeit in a garbled and panicked way, why I had come, but she was in no mood to listen. I do not think she even heard my voice, she was fighting ferociously to hold me and bellowing of her dreams.

I struck her in a panic and flung myself towards the door behind me, wanting only to be free of her. Wishing I had never come.

“Death,” the seer screamed behind me and I swung around to face her once more, my heart thundering in my ears.

For a moment our eyes met. I thought she was speaking about my father and I felt a stab of sick regret. Here I was struggling with a madwoman when my father's body had not even cooled in death. I wanted, desperately, to be back at his side with my mother.

“Death!” The seer screamed again, making her way slowly, as though in a trance, towards me.

I fled her house and did not return. I stayed far from her presence from that day onwards. I returned to my life and I assume the woman returned to hers. I buried my father and began to take on more of my mother's work as grief weighed heavily on her.

On the day of the seer's death, I had gone to the stream to fetch some water in order to cook a meal for my mother and me. The moment I arrived at the stream I saw the body lying upon the floor. In my shock I must have yelled. In an instant I was no longer alone. The other craftspeople were surrounding me. I cannot remember how they came to be there or in what order they arrived. I was too horrified by the gruesome sight before me. Too overwhelmed by the twists and turns of destiny. I was thinking how justice had been served. And how horrible justice could be.

I did not kill the seer, Lord of the Winds, but I am not sad that she is dead. Perhaps now the past will die with her.

That is all I have to say, my Lord, for that is all I know.

The Lord of the Winds and the Slippery Earth

Once the last of the craft masters had left my house, I sat in silence. I could not help but wish that I had remained in my own realm where, from my throne within my cave, I could have seen what had taken place with my own eyes. I did not like to rely on the testimony of others when rendering my verdict. Especially upon the words of these complex and enigmatic mortals. It was clear that more than what the craft masters were confessing to had happened by the stream. It was as though there was a conspiracy of silence around me.

I emerged from my house more confused than when I had entered it at the start of the day. The craft masters' stories had brought me no closer to understanding the truth. I went to the village elder, who waited eagerly for my pronouncement, and told him that I was not yet ready to give it. Though the old man seemed disappointed by my words, he thanked me kindly for my interest in their simple village proceedings. He seemed to think the matter closed. He did not know the Lord of the Winds. I would not rest until I had found the answer to this strange mystery.

I watched as the villagers prepared the seer's body for burial. The blood washed off the old woman's body to be soaked up by the earth. With her face clean, it was clear that the woman had died in horrible distress. Her face was twisted, her teeth clenched and bared.

As I watched them dress her in white linens, I thought again of what each craft master had told me. About how the seer had confronted each of them with a dream. I wondered if they knew that they all shared that same strange experience.

At the burial I stood amongst the other villagers, watching and being watched in turn. I realised it would do me no good to look for answers amongst these people. They lowered the seer into her grave and covered her with earth.

The seer would be by now in my brother's domain. If I was to ever learn the truth of what had occurred, I knew I would have to return to my own realm and visit my brother.

I decided to tarry no longer.

I left the village without a farewell to anyone. It might seem cruel and ill-mannered now but, at the time, the seer's death had soured me to the village and everyone within it. I had thought the place to be a little paradise, a haven I could experience for pleasure alone. But the pettiness, the hidden hatreds, the bitterness, were all too much to bear. I left my home, full of the possessions I had gathered during my short stay, abandoned and open to the world. Let the mortals have what they pleased of my things, let a family live under my roof, or let it rot unloved in my winds and

rain. I no longer cared. I only wanted to return to my home.

The forest greeted me like a mother. The leaves enclosed me in a welcoming caress, the animals roared their welcome. The trees parted to let me pass easily between them. Soon I stood before the sheer stone face of my mountain home. My cave yawned its salutations from near the peak but it was my brother's domain that drew my eyes.

I went immediately to his cave and descended into his underworld kingdom. Though the sight that greeted me upon entering was familiar, it still had the power to overwhelm me. To transport souls was one thing, but to see them together, to lay eyes upon their gathering place, was another thing altogether.

While my cave was smoothed and stripped of any vegetation by my powerful winds, my brother's was jagged and covered in rotted ivy. The ivy clung to the inside of the cave's walls, it always grew, always flourished, but its leaves sprouted grey and crumpled. Already dead. From within the folds of the twining and limp growth, the Guardian Souls peered out at me. When not at rest their forms could contort into the most monstrous and horrible configurations, but having sensed my Godhood they did not move to halt my progress and allowed me to proceed unmolested. I walked deeper into the cave, towards the faint glow of light at the farthest end of the cavernous space. Above me, icicles and flames clung together from the ceiling, signalling this as the home of both the most noble and the most wayward of souls.

Ahead of me, my brother, the Lord of Death, sat upon his throne. His calm visage was one I was always glad to see. Here was a Lord who knew neither happiness nor sadness. He was of the middle. He came to all and did it without regret. He would be able to help me to find the answers I sought if I could only convince him of the effort's worth.

“Brother,” the Lord of Death greeted me as I reached him, his unseeing eyes settling unerringly upon my face, “I know what you have been doing and know what you have come to seek.”

I asked him if he would help me.

“The soul you seek has already crossed into my keeping, brother, you know I cannot release her to you.”

I told him I did not want her release. Far be it for me to challenge the rule of death, when it alone kept the earth in balance. I told him I wanted only to question her.

“What you ask is madness,” my brother pronounced in his customary emotionless tone. “A spirit, once it has entered my realm, must forget all that came before. It is unwise to force a soul to recall the life it has left behind. You know the possible consequences of such folly.”

I pressed the matter and, after some difficulty, finally convinced him to allow me to look for

the seer's soul amongst all the others.

“You may ask her what you will but, brother, never ask this of me again,” the Lord of Death cautioned. “It is far too dangerous to meddle in the affairs of the dead. Be cautious and when you have learned what you wish to know, return her spirit to me upon your winds.”

I thanked him and went quickly to the abode of souls. The gentle glow that bathed the cave emanated from the gathering spirits within its depths. As I neared the place, the steady light shifted with awareness and flickered madly as the souls swirled around one another in odd sweeping motions. It was a place of deep emotion and quivering unrest. The dead only remained in my brother's care for the first year after they passed on and so many of the souls were as yet new and unaccepting of their fate. Within my brother's cave they would learn to make peace with their destiny, to bid farewell to their earthly lives and prepare to start a new existence within the underworld.

I stood on the edges of the iridescent souls and gathered my winds to bring the seer before me. She came forward as the others parted before her. Her image was grey and calm, she did not glow. She was still too tied to the earthly world to accept her death. I summoned her from my brother's cave to my own and sat her at my side. She followed in silence, her mouth already sealed by death's oath of silence.

I sat upon my throne and felt at once renewed. It seemed strange that I had ever grown weary of my world and my place within it. It felt as though a millennium had passed since I had last graced my throne. I never wanted to venture from my forest again. I promised myself that after this horrible event was behind me I never would, but I could not rest until this whole matter was properly resolved. The seer, no matter what sort of woman she had been, had died an unnatural and horrid death at the hand of one of her people. It had happened during my presence in her village. Such a thing could not be borne.

I unsealed the seer's lips and she gasped in a mouth full of air. Her eyes bulged as she coughed against the sudden return of her voice.

I told her how I had come to take an interest in her life and death. I promised her that her existence as a spirit would be more peaceful and easier to bear if the circumstances of her death could be unravelled and her murderer brought to justice. I asked her to tell me what she remembered of her last moments upon the earth.

The seer's mouth worked silently for a few moments. Though she had only recently crossed from the grave to my brother's realm, she struggled to regain the power of speech.

“I did not see who struck me,” she finally said in a slow stuttering voice that hung in the air like a demonic echo of itself, “but it was the hand of fate that guided their aim. You see, I saw my

own death in my dreams. I dreamt a different end befell me on five consecutive nights. I sought to change my fate. I should have known better than to try. Destiny, once written, can never be erased.”

I asked her what she had seen in her dreams and, her bloodshot eyes wild with recollected history, she began to tell me.

What the Seer Dreamed of the Builder

On the first night I dreamed of the builder.

I was lying in my bed. It was night, but I was not tired. I lay and stared out into the darkness. The shape of my ceremonial headdress, suspended on a hook in the corner, loomed frighteningly from the shadows. In the shifting moonlight it looked like a gnarled moulting beast of a bird perched with its eyes glaring in my direction. The masses of gold-tipped feathers fluttered quietly as air gusted through the seams in my house's walls.

All was silent save for the chirruping of the crickets outside. The air seemed heavy with foreboding.

I lay, counting my heartbeats, staring out into the darkness.

Then, suddenly and forcefully, there was a knock upon my door. It roared in the silence that preceded and followed it. Three distinct raps upon my door.

I stood and crossed my house. I hesitated at my door, everything within me shrivelling at the thought of opening it. Finally, I gathered all my courage within me and flung it wide.

A rush of cold night air whipped past me, but other than that there was nothing. The space before my door that I had expected to be occupied by some gruesome spectre stood empty. Yet I knew I had heard the knock. I went out further from my home, turning my head this way and that, thinking perhaps that some of the village children were playing a trick upon me as had sometimes happened before.

It seemed to me that there was a movement, very slight, far ahead of me. I went slowly towards the movement, passing houses quietly. In the moonlight, a figure shifted away from the shadows and disappeared behind one of the houses. I moved more quickly to catch up with whomever was leading me upon this merry chase.

The silence of the night seemed suddenly too heavy around me. I hurried onwards and gasped to see the figure standing fully in the moonlight, with its back to me.

The figure stood before a house. It seemed to be staring at the wall of the structure, it did not move or speak, merely stood like a strange sentinel.

Looking, with my hands clenched at my heart, I noticed that the moonlit ground around the

figure's feet was dark with droplets. Slowly the droplets grew in number, joined and spread, glowing black and pressing down the grass. Rippling outwards.

I found my voice, forced myself to speak. I croaked out a demand that the figure turn and face me. Slowly the person did as I bid.

I nearly shouted out in horror but I clamped my hand over my lips just in time, stopping the sound from rending the air around me.

It was the master Builder I saw and yet it was not. I realised that she was sprouting, her human form elongating. Her arms stretching out and dividing again and again until they hung out and upwards like bare branches upon a tree. The spreading darkness beneath her feet, I now saw, was roots unfurling from her hip and reaching out from her feet to seek sustenance in the rich earth. The air cloyed with the metallic tang of blood and sweet odour of fresh meat as her flesh rent itself from her bones and formed itself anew. As soon as her roots had disappeared beneath the dirt, thick, fat leaves began to sprout upon her branches. As a light drizzle began to fall, the rain slowly weighed down her leaves, which drooped, dropped, then sprung back up to drink again.

I stared at her in the moonlight, frozen in place and torn asunder with conflicting emotions. It could have been a beautiful sight, that perverse transformation, but it filled me with dread. It had been a grotesque ritual of blood and agony. I felt certain that what I was seeing was a premonition of something very dark indeed, I just could not think what it meant.

For an instant the Builder stood before me as a flourishing and beautiful tree. Life, vibrant and natural, thrummed through her tall regal shape. Her roots continued to spear through the earth, one thin tendril working its way towards me. Its tip touched my foot, then stopped abruptly.

The Builder's face, still visible at the heart of the tree's towering trunk, had looked calm and serene until that moment. But the instant her root touched me, the Builder's mouth opened wide in a silent shout, her face contorting until bits of bark rained down to the earth below. All of a sudden a thick rope like a vine burst in a shower of dirt from the base of the Builder's mighty trunk. It spiralled up her roots, travelling with great speed and power up over the Builder's trunk and twining up to her branches.

As I watched, horrified, fascinated, the Builder's eyes rolled back in her head as though in a paroxysm of torment. Her mouth still frozen in that silent scream, she began to rot. Her great, dark leaves began to wilt and rain to the floor. Her branches creaked and curled inwards. Her bark continued to flake and snap apart.

Soon it seemed as though the Builder's entire being had been leached of all life. Shrunken and broken, it looked as though the Builder's form was kept standing only by the strength of the same vine that had killed her.

So shocked was I by the sight that unravelled before me that I did not notice the searching little root until it was too late. Within seconds the Builder's root had circled my ankle and tightened mercilessly. As I fought to break free it tore me from my feet and began to pull me towards the rotting tree that had once been the Builder, and the vine that she had been defeated by.

I stared into what remained of the Builder's face as I was dragged along, struggling with all my strength, yearning to cry out but unable to. Dark liquid spilled from the Builder's gaping lips. I saw that her mouth was widening, spilling a deluge of black blood, ready to swallow me whole.

It felt as though something opened within me. My voice returned in a rush. I screamed. I screamed for all the village to come and help me. The earth thickened beneath my fingernails as the root around my ankles pulled me free from the grass and high into the air.

In an instant I realised that no one would be coming to my rescue. Indeed the village stood quiet before my panicked eyes. Not one soul had emerged to see what was causing all the noise that I was sure they must be able to hear.

Beneath my flailing airborne body the Builder's streaming mouth yawned wide. Awaiting my body like a sacrificial altar.

I awoke in a rush.

What the Seer Dreamed of the Farmer

I dreamt I stood upon a mountaintop at sunset. All around me there was silence and solitude. Not a single human voice or animal's call broke the consuming loneliness of the spot upon which I stood. The sun burned low on the horizon, painting the sky in brilliant orange, red and purple. Even the skin of my arms seemed to take on the wondrous shades of light.

I felt so calm. The sight was heartbreakingly beautiful, I could have wept with it. I sensed a divinity in the moment, a quiet stillness, a sensation that all would be well. But the lower the sun sank in the sky the more this feeling began to fade. A cool breeze, a bitter wind, swept across me.

I looked down upon my feet. They were perched at the edges of a sheer and perilous cliff. Far below me, a vast ocean spread from the end of the mountain upon which I stood to the very tips of the horizon.

I dislodged a pebble with my toe and followed it with my eyes as it hurled itself far below me, bouncing off the mountainside to sink into the waves without once making a sound.

I recall thinking, even in that moment, that it was odd that the little pebble had not made any sound. That the waves broke upon the mountain in mute movements and receded in just the same.

My eyes returned to the sun. It was poised just above the water.

As the sun began to drop over the horizon, the ocean began to boil and hiss as though the fiery orb were truly drowning in its murky depths. That sound I could hear. The bright yellow glow of the great sphere began to fade where it met the water, turned grey and issued vast billows of steam as it sank slowly beneath the waves.

A terrible fear began to take root within my belly, spreading to my quaking limbs. I could not name what it could be, but I was certain that something dark and malevolent was descending upon me. And it would arrive with the full setting of the sun. I felt, all at once, horribly cold, as though I stood outdoors in the heart of a frigid winter as opposed to what had begun as a mild summer evening.

If I have learned one thing in my long life it is that a person always ought to listen to their heart. Sometimes it sees things and knows things that the eyes do not.

My heart was telling me to flee and I obeyed it as well as I could.

I turned from the hissing sound, from the sight of sea swallowing sun, and found that I carried a cane in my right hand. It was the ceremonial staff, streaked with gold and strung with feathers, that I used only on the holiest of occasions.

I hobbled away as quickly as I could from the mountain. It was a difficult journey. The mountain was steep and covered in rolling masses of loose black rocks and ash-strewn dirt. I descended, but even with my staff, I slipped often amongst the pebbles and kept glancing behind me at the horizon as I went, my eyes seeking out the sun and marking its progress, desperate to reach the safety of shelter before it had set fully beneath the waves.

I had very little time left.

In my eagerness to reach the base of the mountain, I gave no thought to the pain in my legs until a sudden and tearing convulsion ripped through them. I lost my footing and tumbled forward, the cane soaring from my hands as I went flying. I hit the ground hard, landing on my stomach, and began to roll uncontrollably.

The rocks and pebbles bit into my body and scratched at my face until I finally came to a jarring stop. I opened my eyes. The sky, not so long ago lit with brilliant colour, was growing darker with every passing moment.

I searched around desperately for my cane and found it just behind me. I grabbed it and used it to drag myself to my feet.

As I stood I couldn't resist one last glance behind me at the sky. It was utterly black, not one speck of light remained. The vast starless heavens pressed down close to the earth.

In the next instant the blood froze in my veins as an echoing howl tore through the trees. It was joined by many others, rising and falling in a cacophony of evil intent. I could not tell from

where the sounds came, they seemed to rise from all around me. Circling close, keeping to the shadows. I was being hunted.

I understood now that this was the hour of the beast, that the setting sun had signalled its start, and I was to be the prey of the evening.

I fled from the mountain through a barren and wilted field, the howls continuing to echo all around me. The sound was of demented laughter. Like a prelude to madness. I feared they were growing nearer. I moved as fast as my wasted legs would allow, leaning heavily upon my staff. I could barely see, the darkness was heavy around me. Shifting shadows, strange silhouettes, sweeping spectres. They rose and fell in waves around me, drawing me this way and that. Confused, panicked and blind I did not see the huddled figure until I tripped painfully over it. I caught myself this time on my cane and landed on my knees. The huddled form was unravelling slowly and I saw that it was the Farmer, but not as I knew him in life. The Farmer's features were familiar to me, but now they rested in the small fuzzy-haired head of an infant. The Farmer's new form was horrid, misshapen, like that of an overgrown child. His adult torso sprouted a child's arms, legs and neck.

He gazed up at me with his compacted face twisted with grief. His eyes wet with tears, his lips trembling. "The Queens are coming and I am frightened," the Farmer gasped in a child's high fearful voice. "Please do not let them get me. Please keep me safe."

I did not think of my actions. Though the form of the Farmer was grotesque to the sight, my heart went out to the pitiful little creature. I grasped his outstretched little hand in mine and began to move again, pulling the Farmer along in my wake.

He cried out for me to slow down, his little legs unable to keep up with even my short stumbling steps. But I did not dare slow when the howls were closing in all around us. I caught the Farmer's little body up against my own, struggling to share the small strength of my body, the helpful support of my staff.

The howls drew nearer.

I recall thinking very clearly: if we can make it through the night, then we will be safe.

But where could we hide? Where were we? I did not even know. What little of the land I could see was foreign and unfamiliar to me.

I caught sight of a light ahead of me in the darkness and moved towards it, pulling the Farmer's disproportioned little body along. It was a small house, with the door wide open and spilling light out into the gloom.

The howls grew deafening in my ear. I heard a rushing movement behind me and knew that the creatures were at my back, preparing to leap, to end me and the Farmer I dragged along like a child in the circle of my arms.

I heard the Farmer's little voice. "Please hurry. I can... I can see them now."

Just as I thought I had made it, as my cane landed in the circle of light near the door, something powerful connected like a blow with my back. I fell forward, landing with a crash upon the little Farmer who cried out, eyes squeezed shut against whatever it was he had seen behind us.

One second the Farmer was grasped in my arms and in the next, he had been ripped away by whatever lurked in the shadows behind us. I scrambled after his rapidly retreating form but could not reach his grasping little hands. The Farmer cried out for my help as he was dragged from my reach. Out of the light and back into the shadows where bright eyes glinted out at me from the darkness. I watched the sight, petrified. In an instant I felt something close around my ankle. I yelled out. Too late.

I was being dragged into the shadows. The light of the house receded into the distance.

All around me the howls renewed with a vengeance and as the darkness closed in again I stared up into the bright eyes that foretold my death.

I awoke with my eyes wet with tears.

What the Seer Dreamed of the Earthenware Maker

I dreamt that I saw myself asleep in a beautiful garden. I lay upon soft grass the bright, brilliant green of the forest. I studied myself as though from a great height, watched myself stirring.

I awoke within my dream. The me that had watched myself sleeping vanished in that instant, I was one again. A single solitary soul in a lush paradise.

I sat up on the grass. I saw that I was wearing my most extravagant ceremonial robes. The honeyed yellow fabric enfolded me like a caress, bright like the sun, embroidered thickly with gold-dipped thread. It spilled out around me like liquid gold upon the sun-dappled grass. I stood and looked around me. The garden was large, it stretched outwards under the balmy sun, but I could see the encompassing walls that marked its end. The flowerbeds were thick with blossoms. Violet, magenta, crimson, umber. Their riotous colours spilled and swirled in little whirlwinds of petals blown upon a gentle breeze.

There was a feeling of grandeur about the scene. A feeling that this was a carefully tended sanctuary. That its custodian, whomever that may be, was a fastidious and dedicated soul. I wandered quietly about the place, my bare feet sinking deep into the plush grass, my fingers glancing from blossom to blossom, the velvety petals cool upon my palms. The place was home, not only to beauties of nature, but ones that had been crafted by human hands as well. I observed several tall golden statues dotted about the garden.

I made my way to the nearest one, my eyes following the elegant lines to which the statue had been shaped. The figure's back was to me but as I rounded it I started in surprise. I recognised the face and build of the figure. It was that of the Earthenware Maker. The statue towered larger than life, the brilliant features stern as they glared down at me. From the statue's blind eyes spilled a steady stream of water. The tears tracked down golden cheeks and fell into outstretched and cupped golden hands. In the sun's rays the statue seemed to shimmer and dance, nearly blinding me with its radiance.

I went around the garden studying the statues and saw that though they had all been carved in the image of the Earthenware Maker; each differed slightly in aspect. While the first wept tears of sparkling water into its hands, the second statue's mouth gaped wide, overflowing with a multitude of glistening fruits. The third held out its hands, palms down. Around the hands, ivy had grown thick and wild, building a tented skirt large enough for a person to curl up around the legs of the statue and be sheltered. The fourth golden likeness was the one that struck me the most. Unlike the others it was small and lost amidst the vegetation. Tucked into a corner near a cluster of jolly yellow flowers, the little golden figure stood no taller than my waist. Its head was inclined slightly to the left and its arms were out and curled inward as though it were hugging the nothingness it grasped. It brought a smile to my face to see the little thing, nearly hidden as it was by the plants, while its more illustrious kin stood proud and tall about the garden.

I walked along the grass, beneath the sun tracking its way gently south across the sky, and towards the imposing stone wall that encompassed the garden. The structure was time worn, choked with ivy and cool to the touch despite the warmth of the day. I followed the wall towards the left, my hand glancing over the smooth rock. Searching for a way out of the garden, eager to explore more of this strange and beautiful world. I passed the statue with the sheltering skirt of ivy. I followed the wall all the way around the garden, expecting an opening or gateway to reveal itself with every step. The sun began to set as I circled. I began to feel uneasy, growing confused. The garden had looked small when I first awoke at the centre of it. But I had been trailing the wall for some time, my ankles creaking with the effort, and yet covered hardly any ground. As the sun disappeared behind the wall, what had been a soothing breeze transformed into a chilling one. I shivered and hurried my steps as the sky began to darken.

I came upon the statue with the sheltering skirt again.

I stopped, my hand still flat upon the wall. It had never left it. There was no break in the garden wall. I felt a shiver of foreboding trickle down my spine just as the first snowflake tumbled, stark white against the black sky, down onto the grass.

I walked to the centre of the garden and turned in a slow circle. My heart fell with my

realisation that there was no way out of the garden. I could not say why exactly but the thought brought about a feeling of great terror within me. There was something almost alive about the place in the darkness that had not been there in the light. A presence seething within the tangled ferns and slowly-closing flower petals.

The snow began to fall more thickly and I watched the green grass disappear under the blanket of white. A sudden hunger engulfed me as I stood there, hopeless and alone.

The golden statue with the gaping mouth called to me from across the garden and soon my feet were carving prints into the white powdered grass.

Even in the chill wintry air the fruits sprouting luxuriously from the stern face of the Earthenware Maker looked sun-warmed and vibrant with colour. I reached out a shivering hand and the tip of my finger touched a plump violet grape.

It shrivelled and decayed in an instant under my touch. As did the nectarine, the strawberries. My fingers spread death in their wake. I drew back in horror, staring in horrid fascination at the limp, mold-ridden fruits that now seeped from the statue's parted lips. My fingers were wet and sticky with their juices.

I walked quickly to the statue that wept a sparkling stream and leant up to wash my fingers clean. I cannot describe the pain that swept through me at the first touch of my fingers to the water. My skin, the very bones within me, burned with the intensity of a thousand suns. I drew back with a shout but the damage had already been done. The flesh of my fingers rose and burst into angry red boils that wept and bled. I packed the wound with snow but could find no release from the agony.

I paced back and forth, clutching my hands to my chest, shivering and whimpering with cold. The snow now rose to my ankles and each step was a burning torment to my bare feet. I recalled the statue with the sheltering skirt in a rush. I had half turned towards it when a suspicion arose in my heart. I tore a snow-heavy flower from its stem and tossed it into the shadowy depths of the statue's skirt.

In an instant the skirt had constricted, tightening like a vice around the statue's legs and twisting diagonally as though to squeeze the last drops of liquid from a rag. The snow rose slowly to my waist. There was no shelter in this horrid place, this place that taunted a soul with safety then closed in with daggers drawn. I could barely move for the snow. I waded through, struggling to move. Not heading in any particular direction, but thinking that effort, any effort to live was better than to wait for my death like a sacrifice at the altar.

As I dragged myself through the ever-falling snow, I caught my foot painfully on something far below me and was immediately overwhelmed with the compulsion to recover whatever it was from its icy tomb. I cannot account for my actions. Who can explain the reasoning of dreams? I

began to dig down into the snow, holding my breath, squeezing my eyes shut, gritting my teeth against the biting cold. My heart knew what I had reached long before my fingers felt it.

That smallest statue. The tiny one with the outstretched arms. I dug down to the grass below, feeling the tunnel I had burrowed beginning to collapse above me, all around me. I reached out, pulled it free, pulled it close. I embraced the little statue, still warm somehow, and felt its arms close around me in return just as the snow crashed down over me in a thundering rush of force and sound. I awoke gasping for breath.

What the Seer Dreamed of the Needleworker

I dreamt of the Needleworker on a sultry summer night. I remember I had trouble sleeping. I must have tossed and turned for hours, awaking often to stare out into the darkness of my home, before I finally gave up on sleep. I sat in the darkness for some time, my thin linen robe clinging with sweat to my body. The air felt as though it were a presence around me, stifling and overbearingly close. I struggled to breathe it, feeling as though I were drowning in its depths. I pushed myself unsteadily to my feet and stood still for a time, waiting for my body to get used to movement. The heat settles deep in my bones, you see, and summer is always a time of much suffering for me. I tested the strength of my legs carefully before beginning to move towards my door. It was useless trying to sleep and I thought that a breath of fresh air might do me some good, might even dispel the strange drudgery that had seeped into my soul. I turned just as I reached the door, thinking to get a jug to fetch some water on my outing and froze at the sight before me.

There, across the room, upon my bed, I could see myself, eyes closed and mouth open in deepest sleep. I was so startled that the breath left my body. I did not make a single sound of surprise or horror. I just stood where I was, at the door of my home and stared at the second embodiment of myself sprawled across my bed.

Had I died in my sleep? My heart leapt in horror.

But no, the me on the bed was breathing quietly.

I turned quickly and struggled to open the door.

From outside, I watched my first self sleeping and also my second self battling with the door. The moonlight glinted down upon me. I stared in horror at my other selves then down at my hands. They shimmered very slightly before my eyes.

I had begun to fade.

I stumbled away from my home, towards the centre of the village. Someone would be able to help me. To stop this strange disintegration. I had a sense that if no one saw me, I would vanish

forever, replicating on and on to nothingness. I needed someone to see me, to know me, to pity me, to make me real.

Ahead of me, I saw the Needlework Master sitting outside her house. A wide net cast before her like a tangled nest of snakes, her deft fingers working in a blur of movement over a wide tear.

I struggled desperately to speak, to cry out for help but it felt as though a bubble had formed in my throat, sealing up my words and carrying them away to the heavens, unheard and unheeded.

I was aware of being at the Needlework Master's side, watching my other self struggling to speak. My hands had faded further, I could see the faint outline of the outspread nets through them.

I fell to my knees before the Needlework Master., tugged ineffectually at the net. She would not acknowledge me.

I became desperate, struggled to speak again. This time, however, I fought against the bubble expanding in my throat and managed to cough it out. I caught the iridescent globule of words and dashed it in the woman's face. The Needlework Master's fingers froze in an instant. Her head tipped up in my direction, but her eyes saw through me to the darkness beyond. She was utterly still for so long that I was greatly startled when she stood suddenly.

I appeared again at a distance, watching myself stumbling back as the Needlework Master rose to her feet. I knew without looking that I had faded further. I could no longer feel the stifling heat, could in fact not feel much of the world around me. I stared around at the shadowy duplicates of myself walking towards me out of the gloom.

I turned back to the Needlework Master and was met with the sight of her nets closing in around me.

I appeared a little distance away and watched my previous manifestation struggling in the nets. The Needlework Master was staring out into the distance as though she could feel but not see me. She pulled her net in again and gathered it up, ready to cast out at the presence that, to her, seemed mockingly close in the darkness. I dodged her second throw of the nets and stood up a distance away, fading again.

There seemed to be scores of my embodiments now, closing in around me in the darkness, glinting red eyes and leering white teeth the only things visible in bodies eaten up by shadow.

I sensed that if I could not make the Needlework Master see me then I would be consumed by the faded manifestations of my former selves.

But every time I stepped close to the Master to gain her attention she lashed out blindly with her net. And the times she caught me, she duplicated me yet again, reduced me even further, created another shadow of red eyes and white teeth to bear, leering, down upon me from the darkness.

Pleas and shouts bubbled painfully from my throat, choking my breaths from my lungs,

escaping from my lips. They floated up into the sky around me and popped in little whispers of sound high above.

I struggled to avoid the looming shadows of myself, even as I dodged the net the Needlework Master cast out repeatedly. I was nearly faded completely out of existence. I could see the ground clearly through my hand. My stiffened bones cracked with the effort of movement, the breath wheezed past my lungs and constricted throat.

I felt torn into a million shards, pulled apart with burning ferocity. Unbecoming was a torturous process that I will never forget. I felt its potent bite again only in death. The agony of the void: of becoming nothing, of being forgotten, of vanishing unheeded from the earth as if one had never existed.

The net burned through me once more and as I appeared at the Needle Worker's elbow to watch myself struggling once again within the folds of the net, I felt a wave of something cold pass over my bare foot. One of the shadows had washed over my skin. The white teeth gaped before me below the double red pinprick eyes.

I could not breathe for the bubble in my throat. I felt myself fading from existence. I felt myself no longer being.

I awoke from that dream terrified to my core. I can tell you that by this time the pattern had made itself known to me. I had realised that all but one of the craft masters had appeared in my dreams and I had little doubt the following night would remedy the lack.

I dreaded to sleep. I feared what I would see.

What the Seer Dreamed of the Basket Weaver

Now I think of it, it is strange that I knew I was in a dream while I was dreaming it. I knew the time had come. I knew that the Basket Weaver would visit me that night.

I came to myself as I was walking along a lovely lake, lit green in the gentle afternoon sunshine. Trees circled its lapping edges and hung their heads low to cool their branches in the still water. I felt a gentle stillness in my heart. I was surprised by the mood that gripped me, the beauty and calmness of it. I felt as though my expectations had been for something all together different. I walked through the damp grass towards the edges of the lake. The ground there was cool as though the water had recently washed over it. I sank to the dirt, groaning gently against the creaking of my joints.

I sat there, feeling the gentle weight of the sun upon my shoulders and the sucking pull of the water stirring around my feet. I followed the ripples that reached out towards me to the tight

core of their birth and watched a fish emerge briefly to snap at a low flying insect before sinking back down into the depths of the lake.

I raised my head and looked around me. All around the lake, past the trees. The place stood deserted. I was alone, shrouded in the chirping of far off birds. No human sounds broke the peace of the scene.

I made my decision then and there. To strip off the heavy robes that I wore and sink into the water's welcoming embrace. I wanted nothing between me and the beauty around me. I wanted to be a part of the painting, at one with the lake and trees.

I stripped quickly and walked into the water. The cool liquid washed over my feet, up my waist, and over my head. I allowed myself to sink for a moment.

I opened my eyes and watched the bright yellow of the sun forming rainbows in the crystalline rippling surface, then fade as I sank deeper and the water darkened to a vibrant cobalt blue. I kicked out slowly, with a leisurely flick of my ankles as the breath seeped out of me in a cascade of bubbles. I floated upwards and broke the surface. The breath I dragged into my lungs filled me with a vibrant thrumming happiness. It blossomed out within me and I felt rejuvenated, alive as I hadn't felt since before the time I had spoken my first and only untrue prophesy and begun the slow but irrevocable spiral downwards into the abyss I now found myself.

I floated onto my back, keeping as still as I could, watching the fish flicking ripples around me. First just one or two dared to swim near, then as my stillness continued unabated, more dared to gather. Every now and then I could feel the gentle nip of wet lips at my elbow, upon the heel of my foot.

Finally I tired of the fish and began to swim, not back to where I had come, but further out towards the heart of the lake. The fish dispersed as I swam and I felt their silver scales glide past my bare skin beneath the swirling waters. I swam until my arms ached then turned back to look how far I had come.

I could just make out a shape standing on the distant shore. In my heart I knew that it was the Basket Weaver, even though I could only make out the form very vaguely. I had an impression of a hand waving in the air. Of a voice, lost on the wind, calling me back to the shore. I was about to answer when I saw the water settling in from where my swimming body had parted it.

A streak of yellow trailed out from my body and stained the path that I had taken across the lake. The water was saturated with it. I caught some of the yellow stuff on my finger and drew it up close to my face to study. The substance was thick and oily to the touch. I rubbed the pads of my fingers together, streaking the yellow into my sun-kissed skin. I turned my hand over and rubbed my thumb over the back of my hand. More of the yellow oil rose up from the depths of my skin and

wiped clean onto my finger.

I was secreting the yellow oil that now stained the water.

The thick gelatinous surface was soon disturbed by a fish, floating face up, unmoving upon the slick. The first dead fish was soon followed by another, and another, until the parts of the lake stained yellow with my skin's oil were cluttered thickly with their stiff bodies. The rest of the lake remained pure and undisturbed. And far on the shore I could still hear the Basket Weaver's voice calling out to me, clear in snatches, torn off by the wind in the next instant. She was calling me back. Begging me to return to the shore to join her, though I could not think for the world why, considering everything that had gone before. I could not bear the Basket Weaver's condemnation, could not bear her forgiveness even. I was certain she would give the latter if I returned to the shore, that she would grant me an amnesty that was not hers to give, nor yet mine to accept.

I ignored the Basket Weaver's desperate calls, the anxious waving of her arms. I focused instead on the yellow-tinged water.

It did not panic me, as you might think it would, Lord of the Winds. Rather, I knew that what was blossoming from my body in glistening beads of yellow oil had been all that was toxic and poisonous within me. I was better off free of it.

I swam out further, not caring once for the fish I left floating belly up in my wake. Thinking only to keep going until the yellow stopped seeping from my pores, until the water behind me ran pure.

Both sun and water washed over my face, interspersing warmth with coolness. Every now and then I stopped and turned to look behind me. The yellow had begun to fade. Fewer fish floated sadly in my wake. From the corner of my eye, for I refused to turn my head towards the shore, I could still make out the silhouette of the Basket Weaver's sad and lonely form. The Weaver's calls still reached me in little bursts, broken by the rustle of the weeping trees.

I struck out further, leaving the heaviness and the stench of death behind. I felt, truly, as though I were abandoning my heartaches, deserting my burdens and moving beyond their reach. I was leaving my ignoble past in my wake, washing myself clean of the regrets that had clung all these many years to me. Foolish, greedy, impetuous youth that I had been, I had accepted a bribe to tell a false prophesy and had led a man and his family to ruin. I had corrupted my craft, disappointed my ancestors and failed myself. I had tainted myself for too long with the vitriol of shame and grasped this beautiful moment of redemption with the desperation of a hell-bound soul.

I swam until the water behind me ran clear, until fish no longer died in my wake, until I was pure again. And then I let myself go. I stopped and sank and the water opened to receive me. It felt like a benediction. It felt like a rebirth.

The Lord of the Winds and the Slippery Earth

Only once the seer had finished the last of her tales did I realise that she had lied at the beginning. She had always known who had struck her the deadly blow. I demanded why she had thought fit to conceal the knowledge from me until the last moment.

The seer stared at me with her milky white eyes, portals to remembrances that should long ago have been forgotten. "Because," the old woman croaked at last, "a tale must be told in the correct order. It does no good for understanding to leap from one part to another with no rhyme or reason. It is in the between of things, the layers beneath the layers, that a tale reveals its most valuable secrets. What happened to me was not unjust. It was a fate I wrote for myself. It had always been written. The Basket Weaver may have set my soul free from my body that day by the river, but she also set my soul free from guilt. It needed to be done. It needed to be settled right. I told the tale as I did because what transpired was an absolution. The Basket Weaver whispered her intentions to me in my dreams and soothed my fears. She told me to prepare myself and gave me time to do so. When I went to meet her by the river, I was ready for my fate. And I welcomed it. A very old account was settled that day and I had hoped the matter closed. But you chanced upon an incident of fate and sought to change it. I ask you, honourable Lord of the Winds, to forget what you have learned, as I soon must, and allow the players in this game to fly free. Both the Basket Weaver and I have our justice and I ask that you leave things as they are."

I saw then that there were some things in life beyond even a Lord's understanding. Existence was a wellspring of mystery: oblique, unfathomable. All could never be seen just as a person could never be fully known. Each of us is a bottomless well and the world seethes with a billion secrets, enough to rival the stars in number. All of us strangers, all of us worlds, caught in webs of association. All lonely and all searching, but in circles. We head out only to go round again, to end up where we began, to find in nothingness, in the beginning, everything we had dedicated the journey to seeking. We wander and scramble, then, for nothing and everything all at once.

Can you see it now?

For nothing. You rush forwards, but you will run forever. From nothing to nowhere. Unless you stop and face your demons. Unless you return to the beginning and confront what it was that set you running in the first place.

But on that day within my cave, upon my throne with the seer by my side, I hesitated. Asked the woman if she was truly resigned to her fate. If she had, indeed, accepted her death.

The old woman asked me if I was offering to restore her to her life. I did not answer, nor did

I need to. I knew the answer was clear enough upon my face. Once destiny had been fulfilled, it could not be unravelled. It was carved in stone and set in the sprawl of the stars.

“Return me then,” the seer demanded of me. The strength of her voice surprised me. “Return me to your brother's realm, so that I may rest and be free.”

I waved my hand and sealed her lips with the silence of the grave. Another wave and I had cast her on a wind back to the depths of my brother's shadowy abode, back to the dominion of souls. I hoped that she would find rest, for I felt that I could not.

My encounters in the world of man had awakened many a strange emotion within me. I had returned now to my own world, to my throne within my cave, to the gentle sound of pots and pans clanging and boiling over with storms and showers behind me. It was soothing to be back. A happy homecoming. But also bitter-sweet, for I had encountered a million little tragedies in the mortal world. Had witnessed numerous follies unfolding before me and saw them reap their bitter oats. Too much sadness. Too much of everything. The human world was a turbulent one, quite unlike the gentle ebb and flow of my world. I was happy now to be back on my plane of mists and jungle roars. To my place of peace. But I will never forget what I had observed of the frailties of mortals.

You have much to learn yet, so before you venture too far from the beginning and are forced to take the long way back to where you need to be, I warn you to stop and consider why it is that you are running at all. Because what is pursuing you will never cease doing so and fleeing will only get you so far.

But perhaps you are too young to take these considerations seriously into your heart? There is a weight around your shoulders that will not disperse. You have heard me but you have not listened. I can feel the storms breaking within you. You are a turbulent bride of the winds, not yet ready to turn back to the shore. If you will not heed my cautions, then will you stay? Will you remain here with me in my realm and dare to leave behind your beginnings?

The Tale of the Lady in Green

It is strange, is it not, how sometimes we see our own destruction and yet go willingly towards it? In those seconds that passed like years I met the storm-tossed eyes of the Lord of the Winds and imagined a life spent within his wind-swept cave. I tried to picture my days and could not. It was this that decided the matter for me.

I yearned, if you will remember, for the unknown. And the Lord, his cave, his realm symbolised all the adventure I had dreamed of experiencing. Thoughts of my mother, her weedy voice fading into the forest, the spectre of the oracle woman in my village – all scattered to the

heavens and were forgotten.

I told the Lord of the Winds that I would stay by his side. I could not tell you if he was pleased or saddened by my decision. Perhaps it was a strange melding of the two. But I had enough exuberance for both of us. His age-old wisdom melted before the euphoria of my foolish youth.

I passed that night gazing upon my world from the mouth of the cave. I passed the second night curled up in sleep, dead to even the child-toads and their incessant clanging of pots and pans. I learned that the Lord never slept, and as time passed within the cave, I too began abandoning my bodily fatigue. I had less need for the sustenance that had once fuelled my human form. Instead, we fed together off the soul of the earth itself, carried to us on gusts of wind from all the worlds combined. On the first night of my second month within the cave, I slept curled up in the arms of my beloved Lord of the Winds. It was the last night I ever passed in dreaming.

My days and nights curled into one long moment, like a serpent coiled in the claws of an eagle. My time there knew no true end nor beginning.

I spent a lifetime in the company of the Lord of the Winds. He was a quiet and lonely soul, given to deep thought and careful consideration. He was a gentle man, but just as a wind can roar with thunder, so too could my beloved rage in his displeasure. Though never once did he turn his anger towards me. Rather, he treated me as one treats the bones of a sacred ancestor. At first, I went through life wrapped in the sumptuous cloak of his care and adoration. To be treated like a queen by a Lord filled me with a warm glowing happiness. I was enamoured of his grandeur, his handsomeness, his love.

He would sweep me from one end of the human world to the other along the paths of his formidable winds. I saw delights unlike any I could have ever imagined. But even the most glittering gem can, over time, lose its lustre. Of course, he had known from the beginning. He had seen, with his eyes that see everything, that I could never give forever, that I was a fickle spirit who only gave of herself sparingly.

I knew from his eyes that he understood the changes within me. He had always known me far too well, with his Lord's eyes that missed nothing and saw everything.

It started to unnerve me that I could be read so easily. That I was so transparent, while he so opaque. I began to disengage myself from his life. It began like this: first I grew tired of his care. Does that sound absurd? It should not. After all, I had once grown tired of my mother's care. Then I made him ridiculous in my heart by dwelling on what I imagined were his numerous and irredeemable faults. I took to gazing out beyond the cave, but this time with a restless unhappiness that could not be quieted.

Understand who I was then. How little my heart was, how coldly I kept myself from those

around me. Ungrateful, hateful, selfish, resentful. I was all these things and more. I think I knew it even then, but accepted it shamelessly. Thinking it a strength to care for nothing and no one beyond myself.

I longed to be gone from the cave and yet could not bring myself to say as much to the Lord. I just wanted away. But life dealt me a vicious blow and repaid me for my carelessness and cruelty. By the time I had the strength to leave, I was round with child and racked with discomfort and pain.

My baby seemed sent by the fates themselves to punish me for my foolishness. It kicked up violent whirlwinds in my belly without pause. Storms roiled within me, burned me inside out with sizzles of lightning. At night, the thunder rolled within my womb and kept me coiled in agony.

I was trapped. By my own stupidity, by the Lord, by my own body and the creature sprouting within me with all the rage of a hurricane.

It was the Lord of the Winds who finally took pity upon my misery. He held me from behind with his palms flat on my belly. When he asked me if I wished to leave, I seized upon my chance, baby or no.

I left the cave of the Lord of the Winds and felt again that rush of exhilaration. That heady whispered promise of the new and unknown. I waddled down the stone steps that clung to the rock-face and towards the forests that demarked the space between the world of the Lords and that of mortals. As I walked, I became aware of my body's weariness. All of a sudden, my eyelids sagged with sleep and my stomach roiled with violent hunger. All the senses I had abandoned for life with the Lord came flooding back.

By this time I had reached the clearing where I had first met the Lord of the Winds an eternity ago. I found a comfortable bed of fallen leaves near the still lake and settled down to rest. I lay watching the stars chase themselves across the sky above me and soon I had drifted off to sleep. I slept the sleep of the dead. That deep sleep that comes only when all has been decided and there is no turning back.

When I awoke, you would not believe it, but a baby girl lay wrapped in my arms. My stomach was no longer rounded. There, in the clearing beside the still lake I had slept for an aeon and missed the birth of my own daughter. Perhaps it was because I had missed the main event, as it were, that I felt nothing now for the girl in my arms. She was a stranger. A burden. The way her little fat fingers clung to my wrists, bruising my flesh, the way her hot breath steamed at my throat, it all night on drove me mad. I could not breathe. I could not think with her clinging like a noose about my neck.

I came back into myself as the little girl stopped thrashing in the water. As her clinging fingers finally released my hands and I no longer needed to keep pressing down. No longer needed

to fight. The clearing was silent again. Still. As though nothing had ever happened. Is it not wonderful? How the vines close in again and seal themselves as new.

When I returned to my village, I returned alone, as I had left it. No one would ever know of the little girl floating in a still lake in between two worlds. It is in time that I learned what the Lord had known all along. The same demons that clamour for freedom in our youth, seek ties with the same fervour in later years. I took to weeping in my sleep and waking to a drenched bed, unable to remember what I had dreamed of. I wandered, looking for something new, looking for someone magnificent to sweep me away, for anything that could make me feel again. Forever reaching out. Always searching. For that little girl lost in the clearing, for the grand destiny that had always lurked just over my horizon. For contentment.

I am searching still.

I see in your eyes that it is my destiny to go on looking. Perhaps it is my fate to wander and to weep. May your search be shorter than mine has been. May you know the end when you have reached it. May you learn to be cautious and content.

Go now, the sun begins to rise and our time has passed. Follow the path beyond my green door and I pray that it grants you all that it denies me.

The Girl Who Awoke

A third key nestles between her breasts. Another set of great gates seals shut behind her with a heavy thud. Again, a moment of darkness.

Then a flare-up of light and the sight of herself reflected back in a dressing-room mirror. She gazes in fascination at the stranger looking back at her. At the million incarnations of her that appear side by side and to infinity when she moves the folding arms of the mirror this way and that.

The room smells of gentle perfume. The vanity table before her is cluttered with treasures, laid out elegantly like a shop window. Bottles and jars, lotions and perfumes, a table lamp built to look like an old cottage with a miniature water wheel in front, a box of tissues.

In the adjoining room she finds wall-to-wall clothing. Coats, suits, dresses and gowns. Jewels, scarves, shoes, handbags, old postcards, strange tokens of days gone by. A lifetime's archive crowded into a little enclave. She wanders out past a grand bedroom, brimming with photographs and baroque furnishings and towards the sound of gushing water.

She stands in a dark room. A door, slightly ajar, looms before her, bleeding light out onto her bare toes.

The girl listens outside the door. From inside come the sounds of hard work underway... The

clatter of plastic basins, the rush of running water, marigold gloves shrieking against one another, the vigorous whoosh and glide of clothes being washed in a sink.

She pushes open the door and pauses for a moment. A form stands before the bathroom sink in relaxed sports clothing, head swathed in a cotton scarf.

A woman.

The girl can feel the rapid cadence of her own heart. The fresh scent of soap assails her nostrils.

The marble floor is cold beneath her feet as the girl walks forward slowly, her eyes trained on the woman. As she moves, she begins to round the woman a little. She sees past the shoulder now, a hint of profile...

The girl sinks down slowly onto a plush bath rug, the strength having seeped from her legs.

The woman turns to face her.

The girl parts her lips...

IV. Fortitude

I once heard of an old man who spent his days avoiding Death. This old man was an active, wiry fellow who often walked long distances over steep mountainsides and arid valleys. He feared that Death, having cast its eye upon his family, would be waiting for him one day upon the path. And so the old man changed his path daily, if he walked down one way, he came back up another. If he took a bus into town, he would take a taxi to return to his home. At night he would lie awake and, feeling the presence of Death hovering near, would plead for just enough time to see in the Spring, and when that time had passed, for just another few months more. And in such a way, he managed to keep the spectre of Death at bay and avoided the fate of his wife and so many of his children. When asked why he avoided Death so assiduously, the old man stated simply that the thought of it was abhorrent to him, that he found Death distasteful and so would avoid it as long as he could. Imagine the life of such a man. Imagine the life of a man who wants to live so desperately, who is so dedicated to his own existence. What do you see? Do you imagine him to be wealthy? Handsome? A prince amongst men? Would it surprise you to know he was a gnarled peasant? Our old man was indeed poor and had little to his name. Such people astound me. I admire them to no end. I want to know what they know, I want to see what they have seen to make them value life so much. To make them yearn for more sunrises. Here is the thing, though, about our gnarled old man. He passed his days in fear, eyes always on what might be, what was cast into the shadows. He missed his life. Death, you see, the kind we actually fear, is symbolic. Symbolic of paths not taken, opportunities untapped, adventures left uninvestigated, questions left unasked, histories forgotten. These are the real deaths. The actual death that comes is unfearable. To fear the end of the body is to fear the moment of being born. It is not real. It is the little deaths we die each day that weigh on me. I look out at the world sometimes and I am filled with a sinking sort of despair. I see the entirety of human suffering laid out like a blanket over our collective history, I feel it like a lead weight in my gut. I wonder what the point of it all is. We exist briefly. In that time we are unhappy, inattentive to the things that matter, we are rushed off our feet and unkind to strangers. We become selfish with our time, greedy with our money. We amass trinkets to fill the longings of our hearts. We learn to suspect and fear one another and build fences and walls to keep each other out. We see the struggle of others and are glad to be more fortunate. We waste everything. The sunshine, the flowers, the very world and all its riches. Our time, our days, our talents. I look at all these things and happiness seems like a child's dream. One of those beautiful myths we tell our daughters to keep them dreaming. Happily ever after, we finish to the joyful sighs of our little ones. Maybe we even believe it for brief sunburst moments frozen forever in our memories. Those little treats that Life casts us to

keep us wishing and hoping. A snapshot of a technicolour afternoon: aqua, vermilion, sunflower yellow splashed in a laugh-echoing park. Kites, white wine, football games, Beefcake BBQs and angry little ponies. This is Life, we think, drunk on joy and wine. But this is a mirage, a brief flicker of light and sand in the otherwise grey abyss of Everyday. Pain, pain everywhere and yet... I would not end it. I too would plead with Death, avoid him... like the plague, as it were. Why? I think because She was Life's intermediary. Because She spoke on its behalf. Because She spoke those happily ever afters in Her voice. In the cadence of my memories. Because She has always believed, and planted that seed of belief in me. It may have shrivelled but the little sprout lingers into my tomorrows. I suppose it is a matter of knowing only what one has seen. What I know is Her. Her fate. A young girl, with a penchant for cleanliness and fashion, a young lady travelling the world in Jackie-O sunglasses, a married woman with a quartet of children and a thriving business. So lucky. In that sense of luck that crashes headlong with unrelenting hard work and good faith. The luck of the Crusader, the Conquistador. The luck of the blindly faithful. It seeps through the generations, saturates my core with the promise of tomorrow. It is fate measured in eternities, what goes down must go up. Her words guide me through: keep your focus on the goal and follow your king. It sounds better in her tongue. In all the stories she swirled out of traffic fumes while I reclined on cow pattern fur and watched the world pass me by upside down and back to forwards. A swirl of faces through glass, lives intertwined with mine but always just beyond the sometimes crumbled brick walls of my enclosure. The women with the clinging babies, a single bare breast, gold coins, and profuse blessings. The wise men, the naked maniacs, the splash of holy water, the smell of fresh soil, the sweep of servants, fried potatoes every night with fruita. The news and the clothes horse, Her too big shoes, the money I stole, the obstacle course I galloped around. These sunbursts that remind me, entice me, seduce me into believing again and hoping anew. And I am caught up again and lost forever. Redeemed and bamboozled all at once. But this is the essence of Life. You must be foolish for it. You must love it as the ancients wrote of love. With folly, without reason. Just because. Like an idiot. And then it loves you back. Unconditional love shared, doubled, redoubled and rebounded. So be brave, as She is brave. As only the foolish are brave. With certainty.

The Girl Who Awoke

A girl awakes and sits for a while gazing at the lake stretching out beyond her window.

Despair needs no words. It scribes itself in the furrows, the crease lines, the silver hairs and downcast eyes. It travels across all realms, all time. The girl is unaware of time passing.

A sunrise, a sunset. It could mean anything. A day, a year, several lifetimes.

What she feels is weariness. Loneliness. Grief.

She feels she has searched a lifetime and only waded deep into the miseries of others. The ladies' tales interlock like the feathers of an albatross around her neck. It bows her head. Distracts her from her own sadness.

Her own unanswered question.

Dare she ask it out loud?

Who am I?

A hundred tales and each only answering the teller's questions. Tales they tell themselves to stay sane. Tales they tell others to preserve crumbled dreams.

So the question echoes, ripples outward, gaining in fervour, clamouring for release but finding only the stillness of the cottage.

A blue door and a green door. She stands between them now. Green to nostalgia and melancholy, blue to hope and misery. The colours correspond with moods, none lead to truths. They only reflect what they see, nothing more. Like the glassy surface of the unmarred lake.

Her choices in this matter are few.

The girl can either sit upon the stone steps beyond the blue door and await the setting of the sun, the glide of the boat, the twinkle of its lantern in the darkness. She can imagine the night ahead. The lady. What colour her silk robe will be. She can begin to hope. That perhaps she would know *this* lady. Perhaps the lady would see her and know her too. She could dream that it would not be like the other nights. With ladies that looked but only upon the surface, where they saw whatever they wished to see. Tales told in one direction. Nights wasted in the contemplation of another's sadness. The hope of a green door, the gift of a golden key. A step forwards in a trying journey. A flicker of memory, a word on the tip of her tongue. Just out of reach. The slide into sadness. The death of hope. The endless loop, the boundless circle.

Or, she can traverse the pebbled path beyond the green door. Through the tangled trees and thorned ivy thickets, over smooth obsidian rocks and clumps of rich brown earth. She can use her keys. They rested now, one on top of the other. A glittering trio between her breasts. She can push open the gates that kept her from her yesterdays, barred her from her tomorrows. Journey through the house that unfolded itself like a puzzle before her with each passing night. Try to remember why all this mattered so deeply to her soul, why it had burrowed into her heart. Why it was so vital that she should remember it.

Only when she heard the tap-tap-tap of the bottle upon the stone steps did she realise how much time she had lost in contemplating her choices.

She retrieves the fourth bottle, reads the usual message within. She replaces the scroll within

the bottle and stood it up inside with the others.

So it was decided after all.

She chooses the blue door and the stone steps. She chooses hope and misery.

The sunset, the lantern, and the boat all tiptoe across the ages. She knows the pattern of play, the surge of emotion.

Another cottage. The girl is led to a kitchen. There are piles of vegetables, sharpened knives, a scarred wooden cutting board, a sink full of pots and pans, two stools.

Another Lady, this one clad in robe of brilliant scarlet silk. The woman speaks in a low voice, almost masculine, underscored with a dancing lilt.

The Tale of the Lady in Red

You should always begin by cleaning. Tidy your house, empty your mind, wash your hands. Fresh. Then the real work can commence.

Let me tell you what is known. When I was a young girl, there lived in my neighbourhood a strange and wicked-looking woman. Some said she was mad, others accused her of being a witch. My mother told me to stay away from the woman's house. But children cannot resist what is forbidden. I think I was playing in the arms of a great tree that splayed out over the woman's courtyard. But I am not sure, perhaps that memory is one of yours? It came about, anyway, that I attracted the angry attention of that strange woman. I fled to her shouts, stumbling as the curse scroll she hurled after me snapped against my heels.

Doomed? You would think so. But fortune had bigger things in store for me. Mind you, we never know such things when they would do us the most good. Only later, upon reflection, do we realise that the same fires that seared us also birthed us anew.

At that time I was a skinny little girl, tall for my age. Even then I prized cleanliness. Even then I loved order. In my mind, I gave everything its proper place. Objects, thoughts, efforts: I compartmentalized and utilised them all. And life gave back. In correct order.

There have been other times, also, when the earth roared up and swallowed whole all that it had once given me. When I gave back with both arms. But those are tales for another day.

No, we should begin in the first of the two compounds in that Place Of A Thousand Worlds. And I mean first in every sense of the word. It all began there. With that odd woman next door. I was just one of many then and He Of A Thousand Worlds loomed large in my universe, though he was in actuality a small-statured man, built along clean, narrow lines. A lean face creased with history, an august gait stuttered by a limp, a vividness of being that cast tall shadows. Later his

worlds would be reduced to ashes by the blast of a trumpet, but not yet.

Of all the children that my mother birthed, lost or raised in that Place Of A Thousand Worlds, my sister and I were the closest, in all the ways that truly mattered and are until this very day, despite the lifetimes that have swayed us both close and far. If she ever asked me I would tell her how full she was. A perfect cabinet, each drawer filled to the brim with some strength or another. I followed her steps, a few years behind.

Now we have washed everything and we are ready to begin. Peel those potatoes for me, while I cut up these onions. In a minute, I will fry the onions in the butter (see how soft it is? how beautiful it looks wrapped in these leaves?) with some ginger and garlic. Let this be the base of your dishes, and you cannot go too far wrong. The foundation is sound, you see. As it is with cuisine, so it is with life. It is always important to start well.

Childhoods are strange. So much can happen. Too much can go wrong. You will see mine one day and it will surprise you. I will look different from what you imagined. Maybe because my histories appear as flashes in an otherwise darkened wood. Mostly shadow, mostly silence. Some little illumination, a moment frozen. One day I will gift these flashes to you. For now I will share them. From my past to yours: me careening wildly upon the back of my father's grey stallion. Me washing the outsides of the house with omo. That day when the curse scroll tapped against my ankle and speared its poison into my mind.

Let us pass quickly over those first few years, they will reveal themselves anyway in the events that follow. My favourite stories are these ones: how I came to acquire my first car (a little red one I shared with my sister), how I travelled the world – young and alone – how I refused your father when he first asked for my hand, how I saved my coins when others went for tea, how I borrowed from my mother and built a fortune.

You will hear these reminiscences often, but you have to understand that I tell these stories to encourage the best within you. To show you what can be achieved when one wills it, to illuminate the winding path before you.

At first you will believe my stories with your childlike faith, you have no reason to imagine that I would ever lie to you. Why should you? (Poor thing, it is only later that your eyes will be opened.)

No, I am not crying. It is only the onions burning my eyes.

After blind faith comes the questioning. You will begin to doubt me. You will think I have misled you. You will build distances between us and cast me out from your world. You will think I do not know you. That I do not understand what your life is.

But you will always come back to me. You will absorb the truth within my tales. And as for

the lies – you will learn that they reveal things too.

Come stir the onions. Not so roughly. Gently, like this.

Now, what was I speaking of? Ah, yes. I was telling you about us. About you and me, about that strange woman who lived in the house next to mine. About my mother and father and that Place Of A Thousand Worlds. I was telling you what my mother told me, while I shivered with fever and sickness the night the scroll struck my ankle.

Yetnebersh

Part One of Two: A Little Girl Awakens

There was a world once, a very long time ago. It floated out there amongst the stars, a very long distance away. It was a world besieged by thunderous waves that frothed up violently from below and torrential rains that sluiced down from above.

In a valley carved deep into the sheltering rock, a small cluster of thatched roof huts bears out nature's ill humour. Far above them, clinging with a strange tenacity to the cliff side stands another hut. Unlike the mud huts of the valley, the house on the cliff is fashioned from smoothed boulders, almost indistinguishable from its surroundings. Inside on the bottom level a single stallion roots amongst some fresh hay. On the upper level an old man sleeps. And a little girl awakens.

She does not have to turn to look out the window. The awning is braced wide with its rod, filling the room with rushes of delightful wind. Outside, the sky explodes into light. Flashes echo dimly in far off clouds.

The little girl, Yetnebersh we'll call her, does not know what woke her. She only knows that she is suddenly and fully awake. Her eyes trained on the world beyond her little portal to the outside. She is holding her breath without realising it. Waiting.

If Yetnebersh had not been looking so intently, she would have missed it. But it was enough. A flash of gold sparking down from the heavens. Colliding with the ground in a shower of dirt, stardust and rain. It was only an instant but she saw it clear as day. Flinched even though the impact made no sound, muffled by the clap of thunder, the sizzle of lightning, the gush of rain.

If Yetnebersh had not been the girl she was, then the story may have ended there. But Yetnebersh just happened to be the sort of little girl to kick off her bedding, creep past her sleeping grandfather, down the steps past the steely-eyed horse and out the door. Then she was flying across the mountain side. Long thin skirt snapping taut around her ankles as she lengthened her stride. Ignoring the rain though it stung her skin mercilessly. Straight towards the flash of gold. She ran without hesitation, headlong. As though she had waited all her life for just this moment.

This, perhaps, needs some explanation.

There was a reason that only a single house clung to the precipice while many clustered below in the valley. The old man curled up in his cot, unaware that his renegade granddaughter had fled barefoot and soaking wet out into the night, was well known to the villagers of the valley. His name and legend were twined with that of their history, that of the earth they called their own. The old man and his silver horse. Even the animal, which had been found as a foal amongst the ruins of the ancient capital, was said to be a conduit for the dark forces that gathered there. When the villagers spoke of the old man, and they very rarely did, it was in hushed tones with backwards glances and muttered lucky incantations.

Once a glorious warrior, now a ruined husk fallen from grace. From the day he had been forsaken by his men and made to carry the stone of shame before king and court onwards, his name had been as mud.

They had once called him by the name he had taken in the stead of his father's. His warhorse's name. A name that was slowly fading into silence, unspoken, unheard. A shunned name. A shamed name. Now they called him only Old Man.

All that remained of his world was Yetnebersh and his horse, and he guarded both with all the love in his heart. The villagers could think him mad if they so wished it, but it was still his duty as a warrior of the realm – or what remained of it now that nature had risen against them – to protect them from what they refused to believe was coming. He knew there was some danger, some darkness out there hovering just beyond the horizon. Waiting...

He had told them it was coming, had kept telling them even when they had turned on him. Now, he resigned himself to standing guard over the unwary and ungrateful. His honour would allow no less.

The villagers, meanwhile, watched his stone hut with growing unease. They wanted him gone, were sure he would *want* to leave now that he had lost everything, and yet he lingered. As one year bled into the next, they began to suspect he remained for nefarious reasons. After that it was not long before rumour had transformed the old man into a monster and a practitioner of the dark arts.

And so it was that Yetnebersh grew up very much alone, shunned and feared in equal measure. When she had company it was in the form of taunting children pelting her with stones and shouting curses that cannot be repeated here. She learned to fight young and the sight of blood (be it her own or that of the other children) did not turn her belly. To Yetnebersh, the village in the valley was rife with foes, and she dreamed of growing powerful and strong and defeating them all, of redeeming her grandfather's honour and building him a throne upon the bowed backs of those who

had sought to bring him low.

It was because of all this that on the night of the falling gold light Yetnebersh did not hesitate to run, but did so with all her heart. A heart that yearned desperately for change and seized any chance of it with reckless abandon.

She was gasping for breath by the time she reached the edge of the crater. Her toes curled over the edge and disappeared into the wisps of smoke swirling upwards and dissipating in the rain. She stood for several breaths, watching the wind hurl itself through the space, her eyes discerning a shadowy image flickering into view between gusts of smoke.

Her feet slosh forward, pull her into the smoke until she too is swallowed up.

The indistinct silhouette looms ahead, transforming into a reclining figure.

The rain still beats down, the thunder still roars and Yetnebersh knows that nothing will ever be the same again.

She stands above the broken and bloodied figure at the heart of the crater.

A woman. Her silver armour, once beautiful no doubt, crushed beyond repair and crusted with dirt and blood.

Yet even in this moment of frailty there is an aura of power radiating from the woman that seemed to quiet the fury of nature around them. Her eyes, black and brilliant, glared out from a bloodstained face. Watching the little girl as the little girl watched her.

The woman arose onto a shaky elbow then crumpled back down with gritted teeth as Yetnebersh fell to her knees beside her.

“You are not frightened,” the woman spoke.

The little girl shook her head slowly. Yetnebersh dealt with problems as they arose, she rarely wasted time in anticipating and avoiding them. A state of affairs that had often earned her grandfather's censure and now stood her in a crater with a wounded stranger.

“I fell,” the woman's eyes were trained upwards, narrowed against the rain. “I was not meant to fall.”

“Where did you come from?” Yetnebersh's words drew the woman's dark eyes back to her. She couldn't help but notice how neat the woman's braids still were, despite everything. Long, sleek rows, down the curve of her head to her shoulders.

The woman bared her white teeth in a wolfish parody of a smile.

“Help me...and I will tell you all you want to know.”

How could a little girl resist? Yetnebersh leapt to action. “I'll get my grandfather's horse. He's a brute of a warhorse but I can make him-”

She stood to leave, babbling in her eagerness, but was yanked back abruptly by rough

fingers closing around her ankle.

“A warhorse?” The woman's lip curled and she jerked the girl's foot out from under her, sending Yetnebersh sprawling on her back in the mud.

Yetnebersh scrambled quickly to her feet, confusion and hurt warring in her heart. Her old friend anger rose to her rescue, obliterating her fear. “Why would you-?”

The woman was pinning her with that vivid gaze again, spitting blood before answering. “A warhorse is sacred to its master. And its master is sacred to it. Such a beast obeys only one commander. You should know better than to try to steal it, for whatever reason, even for a moment.”

There was a second when Yetnebersh, roiling with shame and anger, was tempted to run back the way she had come. To leave this strange woman with her vivid eyes, scarred armour and quicksilver moods to die in the dirt.

The woman was watching her in silence, a slight smirk playing across her blood-splattered lips. As though waiting.

And in a flash of understanding Yetnebersh understood that everything had indeed changed. Her entire life recalibrating itself around this moment. Here was a woman before her, fallen from the heavens, heavy with power and secrets.

How could a little girl resist?

She toiled the night away in the freezing rain, her huffing breaths fogging in the air. Running this way and dragging that.

Near sunrise she returned alone to her grandfather's hut.

The old man sat on the stone step before the front door, his stallion framed in the doorway, hanging its long silver face over her grandfather's shoulder.

He was sharpening his sword across his knees.

The long sharp *whoosh* of his movements was smooth and agile.

The air had cleared. The rain had stopped. A few drops fell in a jaunty rhythm from the thatched roof to the stone-paved ground below.

“Were you out all night?” The old man's voice was low but she heard it clearly over the scrape of sharpening steel.

It was not the question she had expected. Yetnebersh dared to raise her eyes to her grandfather's face. He was studying his sword with the sharp, focused eyes of a master artisan.

She felt as though she were getting a reprieve. Mysterious though it was, she seized on it.

“Yes.”

Silence. The sound of stone on steel stopped abruptly. Now her grandfather looked her dead in the eyes. Yetnebersh cast hers down, disconcerted.

“Yes?” His one word held a wealth of meaning. An abbreviation of the emotions that had swirled in his gaze.

She knew it and thought clearly in that moment before answering: *This is bigger than you. This is my destiny.*

“Yes.”

Every night after Yetnebersh would lie on her side watching the moon grow bright in the sky, waiting for her grandfather's breathing to even. She would hear again the woman's voice: *“Save me now, child, and I will fulfil your dreams.”* It was those words that overcame the frantic beating of her heart and leant wings to her feet as she stole soundlessly from the hut. Past the sleeping old man and the arrogant stallion, past the field with the flooded crater and into the forest beyond.

The forest swallowed her up like a ravenous beast. The moonlight here filtered through where it could, criss-crossing down through the canopy of branches. Cold rays sieved through a vast cosmic net. She walked so that she could no longer see where the trees began, and a little further still.

And just like that she stood on the edges of the ancient capital, now collapsing into heaps and intertwined with serpentine vegetation.

She knew, of course, why the villagers eschewed the place but it had always been her private sanctuary. A haven of absolute silence and solitude. A mausoleum to a world long dead, beautiful in decay.

The fallen stones, the standing obelisks, the profusion of wild flowers, large and small, dull and bright. The slick green leaves against the crumbling cream slabs. The twisting vines, gnarled trees, and ingrown roots.

The villagers said that the ancients had worshipped dark goddesses here. That they conducted ceremonies of blood upon altars set at the foot of their towering obelisks. That they had raised demons with their folly and nearly drowned the earth in darkness. That the people of the land had been saved only by the mercy of the new gods who, in exchange for worship, transported them from the Forest of Sin to the Valley of Grace in which they now lived. They said these things but she had never believed them.

The capital was even more stunning in the night-time. It practically breathed around her. In the vibrating stillness, in the dancing shadows, she could almost see why the villagers could be fooled into fearing the place.

She skipped across what must have once been a paved courtyard but was now transformed into heaps of uneven and shattered pebbles, ducked under the moist moss-covered branch of a

sideways-growing tree and dropped down onto her knees in front of the little shelter made by stone and leaves.

The woman waited for her there. She greeted Yetnebersh more often than not with a sharp reprimand or a guttural snarl if she had passed the day in particular discomfort.

Yetnebersh soldiered through the aggravation of nursing an ungrateful patient, biding her time, waiting for the woman to deliver on her promises. She carried a satchel loaded with food that she should have eaten, but instead had squirrelled away. She strapped a water jug to her back, sloshing half down her back in her hurry, and received no thanks for her trouble. But still she persisted. Built fires, fetched logs. Yetnebersh had even offered to help remove her armour and bind her wounds, but the woman had rebuffed her sharply. Yetnebersh fought to hold her tongue while being bombarded by choice insults, but there were times when she could not. She gave vent to her frustration and muttered rudely under her breath but always from a safe distance and out of hearing of her patient. She may have been impatient and quick-tempered, but Yetnebersh was no fool.

A week passed in this manner.

The second week, Yetnebersh thought that the woman snapped at her just a little less. In the third week, the woman uttered her first word of thanks. On the fourth day of the fourth week, the woman gazed across the fire at the little girl as Yetnebersh struggled against sleep. The little girl sat cross-legged with her face resting on her palm and her arm resting on her knee, her head slumping forward heavily. The woman rolled a pebble thoughtfully between her fingers for a moment before she flicked it forcefully over the dying flames. The little girl straightened abruptly as the pebble glanced off her shoulder and stood automatically to tend the fire.

On the first day of the fifth week, the woman greeted Yetnebersh with the order to sit down, shut up and listen. "It's time you knew. Everything."

Sheferat

Part One of Two: The Birth of a Queen

It was a hundred years, give or take in one direction or another, in this very world.

It was not a very auspicious beginning.

Sheferat was an orphan and a street urchin, too small for her age, too wise for her years. Thief was the first name she earned for herself amongst the dirt alleys of her neighbourhood. Queen would be the last.

But in those early years, Sheferat had little time to dwell on her unhappy circumstances. She was far too busy observing others with her keen eye and absorbing skills with her sharp mind. She

was fast, light on her feet, too clever by half, vicious to a fault and without a scrap of decency to burden her conscience or derail her schemes. In short, Sheferat was destined for great things. And well she knew it. So she stole and saved, worked and invested, fought and won and waited for the right opportunity to catapult herself into a position of power.

Her patience finally paid off in the winter of her fifteenth year. She was sorting through her haul of the day, emptying coin purses and examining gold chains, when there amongst all her pilfered goods, she spied what looked to be a tiny scroll.

Sheferat unrolled the paper slowly.

Warn the Emperor. The Wise Ones have seen danger.

Whoever had written the message had either done so in a horrible hurry or while under extreme duress. The words had been written in a mess of smeared ink. She unrolled further and started as a tiny gold key on a thin gold chain fell to her lap. The message continued.

Nothing to do now. Use the Key and retrieve the Gates.

She read the scroll over and over. She knew it instantly for what it was.

Her destiny.

The only question left was that of how best to exploit this good fortune. The wily young girl sat quietly, scroll in one hand, key in the other, her mind racing. As she saw it, several options unfurled before her. She could:

Follow the message through, attempt to warn the Emperor and be forced, no doubt, to surrender the keys to the monarch.

Try to discover who the message was meant to reach and proceed from there.

Try to discover who was to deliver the message and proceed from there.

Learn about the Key and the Gates herself and go from there.

She huddled in the little shelter she had assembled from scraps of cloth, cardboard and corrugated iron, and constructed in a hidden alcove upon the Lu'ul Hotel's roof. She had managed to live unnoticed there for over a year now. No easy feat, when one considered that the hotel staff used the roof for their breaks, taunting her with the delectable scents of their sizzling beef and roasting coffee. But years on the streets had taught Sheferat the art of invisibility and her little makeshift abode was built to collapse easily into a discreet mound that tucked neatly under some pipes and out of sight.

Her last stolen candle was burning dangerously low. She would have to snuff it out soon. Steal more tomorrow. For now, her four choices consumed her mind. She tried to follow each to its

natural conclusion, imagined potential disasters ahead, compared levels of difficulty. Considered carefully which option would afford her the most gain.

Her candle flickered and died with a whispered hiss. Sheferat was left in darkness. It was cold, no matter how much she huddled in her tattered blankets.

The crickets underscored her thoughts with their frenzied song. She would have to twist this to her own advantage somehow, but she could not risk relinquishing her control of the situation. Not when this was her chance, the one she had been watching and waiting for all her life, and had called forth from the void through a thousand daydreams. There was no guarantee that she would ever chance upon its like again.

It was decided then.

The more people who knew of what she had discovered, the more likelihood that all power would be wrested from her hands. As a child and a peasant, she could too easily be left with nothing. Especially if such as the Emperor were to become involved. Best to be cautious and ask around discreetly, learn what she could on her own about the Gates and the Key before proceeding any further. Sheferat looped the chain around her neck and tucked the key under the many thin layers of her ensemble.

Who knew what awaited her now that she possessed the little trinket?

She smiled to herself in the darkness when her stomach growled and clenched the knife she kept under her pillow (a stocking stuffed with rags) more firmly. It occurred to her that another person may have traded the Key for money, for food, a place to stay – even for a night. Fine gold like that, even so small a quantity, would fetch a tidy sum... And yet, she knew better than to trade a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for momentary comfort. She would not allow her ignorance of the Key's purpose to rob her of its full value.

She awoke early the next morning with her mind already on the day ahead. She had collapsed her little house, stored it away and scrambled across the narrow piping connecting the Lu'ul Hotel with the building beside it long before the first of the morning shift arrived with their bleary eyes and muttered greetings.

Sheferat made her way across three more rooftops before she reached the place where the piping slid downwards abruptly – broken long ago and unrepaired since – and she could lower herself to the ground in the relative quiet of a back road.

She wandered, heading in the direction of the lake where she liked to pass the dead time between when she had to flee her home and when the shops opened and her work began. The morning rush customers with their bulging pockets and distracted eyes were amongst the easiest prey for those of her nefarious profession. Until the shops opened the town was too quiet, and a

pickpocket too easy to spot. So she took the time to watch the fishermen clustering at the lake's edge. Many just returning from their night's work. Others were already gutting their catch, separating flesh from bone into brimming trays and throwing the offal to the large, hideous birds that lingered nearby, waddling their pendulous pink throats and clapping their long mottled beaks. Sheferat watched the fishermen stretching their nets out, working in pairs, checking for tears.

She always wondered what that must be like. To work in a group. Even a pair.

It felt as though she had always been alone. Not that she was complaining. There was no proof that having company would mean she would fare any better than she did now. She just wondered, out of idle curiosity, what it would be like.

It was while her mind wandered thusly that the answer to her main dilemma struck her like a thunderbolt.

She would visit The Mouth. The old homeless madman who roamed the streets near Tekur Anbessa Hospital. He was always to be found there, shuffling up and down the street, stopping to throw his blanket over his bare shoulder, pausing to yell praises to the Emperor.

The man had once been high up in the Royal Court. A respected learned man who had worked his way up from baker's son to Emperor's confidant. He had let the power go to his head and sought to betray the Emperor and so had been cast down and out into the streets. Or so it was said. All Sheferat was sure of was that The Mouth was the only person within her reach who knew anything at all to do with the Emperor and courtly concerns.

She waited until the afternoon rush had passed before heading towards the hospital and The Mouth, the pockets lining her innermost shirt heavy with the trinkets and coins she'd managed to secrete away from distracted shoppers.

That evening found her outside the city library, smoothing her threadbare jacket nervously over her chest, flitting in between the guards and across the foyer under cover of a group of old ladies.

By the end of the evening, sitting in the light of her newly stolen candle, what she should do next was very clear. What she suspected now was that she was onto something very big indeed. Something she was not eager to share with anyone else – Emperor or no.

Sheferat could imagine her whole life spreading out before her from this moment onwards. This little golden Key, gained entirely by chance, was about to fulfil all her dreams. Could she really imagine such a world? One in which she did not go to sleep hungry, or walk the streets cold? A world in which she would feast every day, sleep in plush warmth every night? A world in which she was not the lowest thing, not the skulker of alleyways and the plague of the gutters? Not a person to be loathed?

But a person to be feared.

Oh yes, she could imagine such a world perfectly. She had been picturing it already for most of her life.

Now it was time to reach out and take what was offered.

Let us say that ten years have passed. Give or take. There has been so much to remember.

Sheferat is grown now. No longer a thief but a warrior hell-bent on achieving her destiny. She wears the tempered silver armour of the Imperial Guard. Her position within the Guard is an illustrious one. But we have encountered Sheferat at another cross-roads, at the cusp of another transformation.

She knows it won't be her last. But after that... freedom beckoned.

The day of her plot dawns.

By sunset, Sheferat sits at the head of her own army. A legion of defectors from the Imperial Guard. She keeps the armour, life has made her thrifty, but burns the banner. Her warriors would need a new one to unite them under her.

She watches the moon by firelight. There they were, the company she had often imagined having when she was young and all alone. Her army... still though she sat alone, observing them as they caroused with one another, testing each other out, hatching out mini-allegiances and stirring up some little flames of contention which, in time, would no doubt simmer into grudges. These people were not her partners, they were her ticket forward along the path to the Gates. To using the key that nestled by her heart under her armour.

Finally, she had the means to her ultimate goal.

With a rebellion as large as this one, she was bound to draw the attention of the nobles, of the Emperor himself. She would use the ensuing clamour to sniff out the twin silver Key she needed and control for herself the power of the Gates.

She had schemed and plotted for a decade, been utterly merciless in her quest. She was tempted to let herself sag in exhaustion. To relax and celebrate. But she knew that would not be wise. It may have taken her a long time but all she had done was prepare herself adequately for battle and make her way to the starting line. The real journey had yet to even begin.

First Intermission: A World of Duelling Realms

Imagine a world where two realms meet. Like an onion chopped in half, massive roots unfurled and motionless amongst the stars, flat-sides pointed inwards with the clouds in their skies forming an

invisible border between them.

Two realities running concurrently, each unaware of the existence of the other.

Now, imagine it was once possible to travel between these two worlds but that the method has been lost with the ebb and flow of centuries.

In that time before time, there lived on the world that was then called Meroë, a people whose great name would be long lost to the annals of history by the dawn of our age. These people were ferocious warriors and devout shamans. They lived in a way that praised and gladdened the earth and nature repaid them their kindness and breathed secrets to them in the night. There amongst their camp fires the mountains conjured wisdom into song and the soil reverberated with knowledge.

The people of Meroë discovered in this way that they were not alone on their world and set about mastering a method by which to visit the other realm that hovered just out of reach.

In time they found it.

How could they have ever fathomed the destruction their discovery would bring?

They busied themselves with ceremonies and scents, candles and chants, chemistry and physics, art and poetry. They tore open two Gates in space: one with which to leave their realm and enter the other, another by which to return. The power that radiated from the Gates in golden swirls and silver waves forced apart the two openings and sealed inwards like a wound, making travel both ways through one opening impossible. The finest artisans of Meroë were then called upon to craft two delicate but powerful Keys to secure the Gates.

Some things, however, are not so easily contained. They splinter outwards, defying secrecy, confinement, control. They overcome their would-be masters and consume everything.

It should be said of the Keys that they were never held together and by the same person. You see, those who crafted the two keys did so by harnessing the two opposing forces of heaven and earth. They forged the Keys knowing that they could only be brought together under the most catastrophic circumstances. Those people understood the power of the world and all its forces and were careful to respect its rules and obey its regulations.

Those who make a study of human nature can well imagine what happened next. It was inevitable. That many years later, amongst the generation who came after, there was born one who refused to be bound by the edicts of others.

Someone who dared to bring the two Keys together. The true reason why someone would commit such a folly is something that will remain lost to the centuries. I can only speculate as to motivation: an ego gone mad, a thirst for power...morbid curiosity. Who can tell?

It is only remembered that on the day that silver met gold and two Keys pressed together as one, the clouds over Meroë flooded red as the sun splintered within and spilled out. The ancient city

rocked on its foundations and groaned with the strain of shifting mountains.

A figure stood amongst the shattering monuments with staring eyes and gritted teeth, two keys pressed together in a clenched palm. An obelisk crashed down and was swept up into the heavens and deep beyond the clouds. A stinging, singing gale blew and unearthed trees swirled up and disappeared into the clouds in its wake.

What the sky swallowed, it did not return.

A figure was wrenched, screaming curses, hurling epithets, up into the sky.

A bursting, bleeding sun glinted on silver armour and was swallowed up into darkness.

A single key tumbled down.

Yetnebersh

Part Two of Two: The Queen of Keys

There was a world once, a very long time ago.

It floated out there amongst the stars, a very long distance away.

It was a world besieged by thunderous waves that frothed up violently from below and torrential rains that sluiced down from above.

But it was not a complete world in and of itself. Rather, it was only one half of a whole. Not unique in all the galaxy but replicated in the heavens above.

It should have shaken Yetnebersh askew on her axis but it did nothing of the sort.

She listened to Sheferat's tale without once interrupting. She only sat and let the words soak in. Did she believe? Could she believe?

Here was a woman from the heavens, spinning unbelievable tales of wonder. And yet, Yetnebersh had seen the woman fall amidst sparks of gold with her own eyes. She saw herself the tarnished and dented silver armour, stained black with dried blood.

A silence hovered between them. Two people in the moon-bathed seclusion of an ancient ruin. Perhaps the only people still awake, in a world given over to the creatures of the night both great and small.

Yetnebersh, we have established, was wise beyond her years. This she shared with the little girl that Sheferat had once been. She was also an orphan, an outsider. But she was not alone.

She had only made herself lonely. By keeping secrets. By answering 'yes' to her grandfather when his keen eyes had obviously already seen what was beyond words.

But Yetnebersh was also a little girl who wanted big things. Her grandfather's obligation and sacrifice-choked life of endless toil and silent servitude held no interest for her. She wanted more

than a stone hut clinging to a precipice. More than a village, clustered together through habit and fear, in the valley below. She could not say *what* it was she wanted. Just something else.

Something *much* more... else...

The cautious intelligence that her grandfather had instilled in her reasserted itself and Yetnebersh observed the fevered glint of Sheferat's eyes; eyes as deep and dark as a bottomless pit. Eyes deep and dark with secrets.

The story Sheferat had told was not complete. Yetnebersh felt this in her heart and knew it to be true. She also believed the evidence of her eyes. Sheferat was a powerful woman. That was clear, even if her story were not to be believed.

“Why do you tell me this?”

“In thanks for helping me when I needed it most. You are the first person to ever come to my aid. What I will show you next, however, will be because I have come to realise that our meeting was no accident.” Sheferat reached into her armour and pulled free the gold chain around her throat.

The little Key glinted in the firelight.

Sheferat let her hand fall back to her side. Let the gold Key just rest there on her chest, upon the silver armour.

“It is for you to decide. You are young and I know it will be difficult. But so is life. Make your choice now.”

“My choice-?”

“These Keys repel one another and I no longer have the power to bind them. I cannot take it with me when I search for the silver one. I ask only that you keep this safely for me.”

“You would trust me with this Key?” Yetnebersh was aghast.

“Yes.”

The sudden enormity of what she was being asked to do settled heavily on Yetnebersh's little shoulders. Too many things could happen to such a tiny, valuable thing while it was in her keeping. “Hadn't I better ask my grandfather to-”

“This is between us women,” Sheferat scoffed, reached up to return the necklace to its hiding place. “If you would rather not – ”

A little hand appeared before Sheferat's eyes, moving so fast it was a near blur. “I'll take it.” Yetnebersh closed her fingers over the skin-warmed metal. “When will you come back?”

Sheferat smiled. “That's just it, little girl. I won't come back. If I find the other Key, I will return to my world. This key is yours to do with as you will. Now get back to your house and don't come back here tomorrow. I won't be here.”

That all happened so many years ago now.

Yetnebersh can remember it all like it was yesterday, though it seems as though generations have come and gone since then.

Rain splatters over her wind-roughened and weather-beaten face. It is a weary face now. The visage of someone who drives forward by sheer will alone, having broken body and shattered soul long before. The ship beneath her rears and falls with the crashing waves. She grips a length of rope with one hand and rides out the lurches with ease.

She thinks of her grandfather and his horse. She knows they are still where she left them even though it has been many years since she has been back home. She knows that time does not wear on her grandfather as it does on others. And she knows too that he still lights the torch outside the door to guide her home. Knows he still waits. For her, for the darkness that he always said would come, for when he would be needed again.

Her purpose in life...was something else entirely. Something that she had greatly misunderstood in her youth and to her own peril. Her fortune was one that required the grate and grind of years, not the sunburst of a brilliant instant. Now those years had carved deep lines into her features and streaked her hair with silver. Her skin was like leather, the better to defeat the buffeting winds and stabbing rain.

Yetnebersh would have laughed had she not been so bone weary.

Beneath her rain-soaked clothing, she couldn't even feel the little gold Key. She had worn it for so long that it may as well have been a part of her flesh. She did not need to feel it to know it was there. She would have sensed its absence like a shift in the winds, felt it like the loss of a limb. No, the Key was quite safe, nestled against her heart.

It was a testament to a life brought full circle.

And now, finally, she was going back.

To the old man she knew would be waiting outside his stone hut with a silver horse's head resting on his shoulder and torchlight reflected in his eyes.

She is aware that she is returning to the beginning. A night just like that fateful one so many years ago. Lightning, thunder and the steady tumble of rain.

She walks without thinking, her steps bending by nature towards the stone hut. But to reach it, she must first traverse the towering forest with its canopy of branches and graveyard of moonlit ruins. She moves with a sure, steady pace, head bowed against the rain. Shadows loom up and are cast sideways. The ruins rise up out of the darkness, tangled with seeking vines and twisted roots.

The air is heavy with the smell of earth.

Soil and stone.

Here and there, water drips down from above, beating upon the ground in a pleasing cadence as the interlocking canopy overhead shelters her from the brunt of the storm's fury. She stops abruptly. The crushing, crunching, clatter of her shoes ceases. Silence seems to fall like a shroud over the forest.

A ball of light glows a short distance ahead of her. It burns gold, flaring up and sizzling down in echo of the gusty wind. A torch.

When Yetnebersh calls out a greeting, she is met with silence.

She moves forward, picking her steps carefully, squinting against the raindrops, focused on the light. The closer she moves to the light, the more it reveals. A shadowed form. Six legs. A backdrop of crumbled stone, twined roots, glossy leaves.

A great head looms suddenly out of the darkness. Long and silver. A single black eye glares askance at her.

A horse.

Just as she realises, the torch is shifted to the side. An old man stands before her, his horse's head resting on his shoulder. A lifetime seems to have passed between them. And yet, when he embraces her and she feels the familiar press of his kiss on her shoulders, it is as though only a day had passed since last they parted ways.

“You knew I would come.”

Her grandfather nodded and smiled. “I knew you would try. Come, I have brought food.”

He was already walking, heading towards the same enclave where she had once dragged Sheferat so many years ago.

“Here? But we are near enough the hut – ”

Yetnebersh fell silent as man and horse continued on in front of her. “I live here now. This is where I am needed.”

Yetnebersh sat where Sheferat had once lain. The fire crackled between them. She listened to the world around her. It seemed to her that the world listened back. Not a single insect song rustled out at her from the forest. She was holding her breath. So was the forest.

She watched her grandfather. He had not aged a day. How was it possible?

This man had raised her, had loved her. How was it possible that they stood now with an ocean stretched between them, eyeing each other suspiciously from opposite shores?

Her grandfather's face was creased like finely tanned leather, his eyes mirroring the flickers of red and gold flame. “All these years,” he said at last, “Yetnebersh?”

Two meanings. He is reverting to his Courtly ways. She knew for certain, then, that he knew.

“When you were a little girl and you would come home at sunrise, having spent the nights roaming about like a hyena, we would play a little game, you and I. I would ask if you had been out all night. And you would answer 'yes'. Only yes. That is when it all began for you. For both of us. All the years I waited, preparing to battle the darkness that would destroy our world and I never once dreamed that the source of it would be my own granddaughter. I could have helped you if you had stayed, but you rushed headlong to your own doom. Why?”

“I grew tired of waiting for life to begin,” Yetnebersh could be honest now, at least.

“So now you return to where you should never have left, to do what should never be done. It is with love that I tell you, I cannot allow it. It is with love that I tell you, I will stop you.”

“I have burned my life away,” Yetnebersh pulled the Key from her shirts, “looking for this Key's twin. I have given...everything... And now to learn the silver Key was here all along.” She looked past her grandfather now, to his steely-eyed silver steed. “All along, just under my nose. Grandfather,” she smiled now, “I will have your Key.”

“It is your ruin I seek to avoid.”

But she was too far gone for words.

Too far gone even to feel the trembling of the ground beneath her feet, the rain of ash and dead leaves from groaning stones and a forest suddenly alive with noise.

Yetnebersh was no longer the little girl who had left home with a big secret. The years had transformed her. She had soared in her imaginings but plummeted to reality with a force that had wounded her through and through. Now she flailed out in the darkness of her own soul at a dead run, her eyes moulding innocent shadows into malevolent demons, making foes of all things.

Just where had she been?

Second Intermission: An Old Man and his Horse

In his days of glory past, he had cut a dashing figure. You would not know it now to look at his lean form – muscles tight to the bone, close to the skin – but he had once worn a velvet cape and swept among the nobility. Those were his pretty years, his vain years, his foolish years.

He looked upon them fondly.

Now he was Old Man to the villagers.

They said he had lost everything. That life had had a merry joke at his expense. The joke was on them. His eyes had been opened.

He had been given a destiny. A purpose. It just was not the one he had expected.

Still, he never ceased to be amazed and, when he was being his best self, amused by life's

little tricks. Amused at the twists of fate and unexpected detours. The granddaughter and grandfather had been swept apart by time and being, now their swords were drawn and poised wearily across the gaping chasm, when they had once shared everything, been everything to one another.

He could see it clearly if he looked back now. All those years ago when he had been a dashing young man. Those carefree days summering with the Princess in Wondo Genet. Soaking in the hot springs, eating like a King, dancing with the moonlight glinting off his gold embroidered cape. Once upon a time...and...the end. Just like that. One moment tipping back *tej* in the midst of a feast, and the next he was being called away. Strangers had arrived without invitations and were asking for him by name.

He remembered how perplexed he had been to see the raggedy-dressed peasants with their bare legs and knobby knees. The leader amongst them explained that they had walked a great distance, across many miles, to deliver their message.

“We have been sent by the Wise Ones of the North,” the peasant said. “They asked that we bring this letter to you. They asked for you by name.”

The Wise Ones of the North were hermits who had devoted themselves fully to their faith. It was said that their religion imbued them with magical powers. That should they be especially devout, they were even capable of disappearing from the world of mortals entirely. That such people would even know he existed, let alone wish to send him a message, was a shock to say the least. He had seen to it that the peasants were well-fed and gifted them with spare clothes from his own trunk before bidding them farewell and retiring to read the missive.

Everything you know will end. What was contained will rise again. What is above will crumble down. Warn the Emperor. Guard the Key.

What to think of such a message? How to decipher such poetry?

The Key... His mind had hovered there.

What he should have done was go straight to the Emperor. What he did, was seek guidance.

The Guardian was parent of the faith, styled as the font of all its goodness and keeper of all its glories. The Guardian had listened quietly, eyes narrowed in the incense-filled room, to the contents of the Wise One's message. Had promised to pursue the matter and send word to the Emperor.

He could admit, as an Old Man, that there had been a childish arrogance to his visit with the Guardian. To think he knew better than the Wise Ones of the North! Warn the Emperor, he had been

told. He had failed.

Well, he had paid for his folly. In part at least. Now... with Yetnebersh he would pay the remainder. His bill had finally come due.

Back then, he had not stepped five paces beyond the Guardian's office when some men had ambushed and seized him. Only later in prison, once his horror and rage and confusion had worn off, did he realise the full comedy of what had befallen him. The Guardian, fearful of a stranger having the Emperor's ear, jealous that the Wise Ones had chosen this stranger as the keeper of their message, and twisted by a sudden and consuming anger, had lashed out in terror. The Guardian had made vicious accusations and an innocent man had been cast low, stripped of his titles and thrown in prison with common thieves and vagabonds. The ultimate disgrace.

His invented crimes – that he had approached the Guardian with a plot to undermine the Emperor and overthrow the regime – were trumpeted from the rooftops for all to hear. His good name besmirched and his proud shoulders crumpled with wariness, he marked the passage of time in his prison cell in heartbeats. In seconds. Each one a torture. Each one a reminder that he had failed in his duty to the Wise Ones, to the Emperor. And that while he sat, mouldering in a cell, some unknown danger was creeping closer. *Everything you know will end...*

The dead time that hovered over prison life, unoccupied and inactive, like a madness-inducing gas had been, surprisingly, good for his mind. His long hours of solitary contemplation, of incessant pacing and furious muttering cleared the fog of confusion that had befuddled him. He began to see things more clearly and thought again and again of the Wise Ones' message and the words contained within.

He thought of his native land, far from the glamour of the nobility's entourage. In a place of deep valleys and towering forests...where ancient ruins hummed with darkness. He thought of the last time he had visited there. Wandering the land, laughing into the night with his son, who had returned to the village in the valley to raise his own family. He thought of how, while on his customary dawn ramble, he had come across the ancient ruins half drowned in the thick morning fog. And there in the ethereal silence and absolute stillness – a silver foal with spindly legs and sharp black eyes. It had run when it had seen him, but upon returning the next day he had seen it again. And again it had fled. For three dawns man and beast engaged in the same bashful dance, until finally the foal only retreated to watch him warily from afar. On the sixth day, he was allowed to approach the quivering horse and sit on a collapsed obelisk close by. Four dawns later he reached out for the first time and ran his hand over the foal's smooth silver coat. It had been a long wooing, but he had felt something profound move in his chest the moment he had seen that horse and he had been determined in his heart to have it. He and that animal shared a kindred spirit, something

behind the eyes. He had found his preordained warhorse at last. He had left the young horse to his son's care before making the long trek back to the Emperor's side. He planned to return once the animal was old enough to make the arduous journey with him to the capital.

He reflected upon all the loose ends he had left drifting as time swept along in his dark cell. He had lost all track of how long he had been held by the time he was finally taken from his prison and made to appear before an Elder for judgement. He was an Old Man by then and eager to return to the sacred task appointed to him by the Wise Ones, to his old village, to his son. So when it was decreed that the condition of his release was to carry the stone of shame upon his back across a crowded avenue, he did not hesitate to do as he was bid. His eyes did not see the crowds, his ears did not hear their taunts and hisses, his body did not feel the weight upon his back.

It was later that the agony would bleed out from his bones, after having rushed home to his village and found only ashes where his son's hut had once stood, after the villagers had chased him out of town while he was choking on his sobs of grief and blinded by tears. They pelted him with stones, yelling that they did not want to risk more of the Guardian's wrath... That the Guardian's men had already come for his son. That they had found him fleeing to the forest with his wife and child on horseback and brought them back to the village, secured them in the hut and set it ablaze... It was only then, that the grief had overwhelmed him.

Truly, he had nothing left. The obsession of his imprisoned years, the madness of his lonely musings, the kernel of hope sheltered in his soul – all faded to dust and ash. He had wandered, confused, bemused, dizzy with grief, and found himself amongst the ancient ruins in the pulsing darkness of the ancient forest.

When he had heard the noises, he had assumed it was his desperate mind playing wicked tricks.

It was not.

There before him, curled up together for warmth. A silver horse and a very little child. A little girl with his son's face and her mother's serious eyes. A silver horse with sharp sideways-gazing black eyes.

They redeemed him, those two. Brought him back from the brink.

The Wise Ones who had sought him out, the Guardian who had imprisoned him, the villagers that had turned on him, his son, his daughter-in-law, the horse, the ruins, his granddaughter – all strangely intertwined. Life was like that sometimes. People, places, and events tangled together like bits of thread, impossible to pick apart. Like a rending veil, the floodgates of his heart were torn open, pulled wide apart. And as the years of hatred, regret, and pain bled out from his pores – love rushed in to fill the vacated space. An over-abundance of love that touched gently upon his entire

universe and everyone in it.

He had not lost everything after all. Something could be salvaged from the tragedy.

And just like that, his purpose was renewed. Redoubled.

He would guard his granddaughter, watch her grow, he would guard the villagers, watch them thrive, he would guard the Key and watch for danger. Whatever was coming, he would be there to meet it. The villagers had cast him out of their valley so he built a hut overlooking them upon the cliff.

But now, staring at his granddaughter's pitiless face in the firelight, realising that it was *her* will, *her* secrets, *her* darkness that he should have feared all along, he began to worry that he would not be strong enough to do what must be done.

If he were to falter, if he were to fail... It made him shudder to think it...

She might very well rise this night.

Sheferat

Part Two of Two: Sleep and the Art of Forgetting

She heard a new king had arisen, heard he came from the faith and knew her time was running out. She wandered the land, a haunted woman, all that she had left behind taunting her: her armies and fortunes untold. For this one dream that was leading to her utter destruction.

She returned to her old ways with a ferocity she could not have dreamt of as a young girl. She stole to survive on her journey. Food, clothing, horses. She was feral in her will to survive, in her quest to find some clue of the silver Key and return to her world. From there, she could begin afresh. Re-equip herself, refresh her powers, strengthen her resolve. She could try again to gain power over the two realms by uniting the silver and gold Keys with the proper enchantments.

She had begun her pilgrimage a century ago or a century hence and now, here, she would end it.

Finally, Sheferat is standing on a mountain pass overlooking the walled city of the new king. And beyond it the holy dwellings of the Wise Ones of the North.

She had heard that the new king was a great ruler, born under a blessed sign, surrounded by honey bees, guided by prophecy. She heard that the Wise Ones had foretold his coming. That they had awaited it as the signal of a great rebirth for their land and faith.

Lurking in the shadows and creeping down alleys, she had gleaned what she could in the villages she had passed. By firelight, candlelight, torchlight she had heard the whispers, the songs, the praises.

A new age was dawning, the people were saying and she knew, in her heart and with all her being, that her time was running out. So she had hurried, though her speed felled her horse, ravaged her feet, blooded veins in her eyes, twisted her still-healing body into painful contortions.

She entered the city as a peasant, a cheap tattered cloak pulled tight over her battered silver armour. Her face was convincing enough. It now bore fierce tight lines and curiously-lit eyes that could easily be confused for hunger. But hers was a hunger not of the belly but of the mind. An obsession powered by a will beyond reckoning.

She melted seamlessly into town life, was soon lost among the rabble. The cobblestoned streets were steep in the mountainous region. She struggled up and through the town, shuffling very slightly, gritting her teeth, righting her gait.

She passed the night on the outskirts of town overlooking the glowing torches of the holy dwellings. Pain, both that caused by her body and that caused by her soul, kept sleep at bay and she lay late into the night, letting her body sink into the dirt...empty of everything but desire.

Near dawn, the holy men who cared for The Wise Ones began their chants. She heard the cadence of their voices rise and fall to the deep, slow beat of a drum.

She would wait until their ceremony ended and they returned to their solitary contemplations, unprotected. She had heard enough of their power, had grown desperate enough in her search, to seek them out now. She knew, however, that they were closely guarded and not just anyone could visit them. Her plan relied on stealth and perhaps a little violence, to which she was not averse.

After all, she was not a greedy woman. She only needed one Wise One and only for a moment.

Just one to guide her true. To guide her home.

Such a small thing, surely.

She would allow no-one to deny her.

That night she dreamed that she had everything she wanted. That the Wise Ones spilled their secrets and, re-invigorated, she set forth and claimed her prize. She found the Key, secured it with ease. Travelled back to her army, to her wealth, to where she was best. Back home, because it was *home*, despite everything. Because of everything. From there, from where her roots grew strongest and thickest, she would recover and seek anew... She would rise from the ashes of her failures and reign supreme. She would be Queen once more. A true Queen. A Queen of the Two Realms. Strangely, she dreamt that she encountered again the little girl she had met so long ago on the night of her fall.

Yetnebersh... A little girl who had amazed her with her calm and daring. Her audacious bravery...

Sheferat awoke with a rush.

The air was cold and the ground beneath her was wet with dew. To the east, the sun began its lazy ascent to the heavens. The chanting had stopped. All was silent.

A whisper of something hovered in the air. A warning.

Something was wrong.

She had come so far only to commit a fatal error at the final hurdle.

Someone had seen something. Someone had spoken out against her. Someone had raised the alarm.

She was surrounded by soldiers.

Sheferat watched the king approach through the bars of her prison. She saw his lips move as he addressed her but what she heard was the crumbling of her dreams, the clamouring desperation of her hopes railing against this injustice, snarling for an escape.

What could they do to her that life had not already done? What did she have to fear?

Death?

She had overcome it, rendered it futile. She had travelled between worlds and raised an army. These people had no idea what she was capable of. They could hardly fathom the power of a true Queen.

No, they could not kill her.

So they did not.

The Wise Ones were called upon and as their chants rang out into the night, they cast their enchantments over Sheferat. And though she railed and fought and cut down enough to paint the prison red, she was overcome and slumped into a deep slumber.

She slept as they buried her deep within the mountainside. As they carved a monument into the living rock over her sepulchre and instilled it with their incantations and perfumes, trapping her forever. Her name lost to the annals of history, she slept through the centuries, forgotten by a world which spun away into the future without her.

The Tale of the Lady in Red

This is how you will awaken in our villa amongst the trees, at the end of the lane. In that time when hyenas punctured the night with their laughter, before the skyscrapers closed in around us. It will

seem earlier than it is, colder than it should be. I will have already opened the windows. You will feel the press of my *mesqel* against your head. You will hear my voice calling your name. Once, twice. The third time will be tinged with impatience. You know better than to test me.

I named you well. Nine months confined to the villa, nine months to dream and believe, and know in a way that it should be impossible to know – that you were coming.

You know I am an early riser. I wander the rooms in my *gabi*, arms outstretched, palms up. I stand in the doorway of our home and sometimes you join me there. Still sleepy, snuggling into my legs to steal my warmth.

But our story together begins even before that. Even before me.

You see, time rebounds. It slides us between our realities. A scent, a word, a song and we are reminded of our eternities past. Life's true meaning swirls in those star-bursts of recollection, but it also hovers in the gaps and silences of our memories, in the truths we know, and the ones we forget, in the lies we weave for others and the ones we choose to believe. There is significance in all our floundering, but we are blind to it in our panic. It confuses and overwhelms us, casts us adrift in a yawning void. We grow confused and angry. We want to grasp life, to make it ours to command, to know it completely and bend it to our will. But the true essence of life likes to retreat from our questing eyes, our grasping fingers. It hides in the shadows like a mischievous imp and runs when we come near. This is meant to be a game. We are meant to follow. To run too. But time plays with us. It wears on our patience and exhausts our faculties and as we age we grow weary of running. We watch life running from us with sullen faces and pouting lips, too heavy with regret, fear and doubt to follow. But if we would only dare to open our hearts, to turn back around we would see life standing behind us, eager for play.

Do you see, then, the wisdom in my mother's stories? On that night so many years ago while I shivered with fever and sickness. After the strange old woman who lived in the house next to mine had hurled a curse scroll at my ankle and speared me with its poison. My mother told me the legend of the two Queens to remind me that life would be what I made of it. It was up to me, in the end, if I would surrender my power to that of the strange woman's. If I would surrender my health to her curse, or if I would be brave and rise up in rebellion. If I would fight for myself, for my health, for my place in this world, for the ones I love and the place I live.

That night, I heeded my mother's tales and I chose to fight. I have not stopped since. We can surrender if we wish it, we can say life is hard, we can fall victim to its fluctuations of fortune and lose ourselves to the void of non-existence. Or we can chase that mischievous imp. We can run. We can be brave. My mother always believed that faith imbued its bearer with great power. And to nurture faith in oneself is to court divinity.

My darling, you have lost yourself but you can be found again. Just have faith in yourself. Stop asking others. Look within. You have always known. You will always know.

I am only a weaver of tales. I embroider vast tapestries hoping to share them with you, hoping some of my threads will align with yours and that the ones that differ will complement. I will tell you my truths and my lies, for you must hear both, and I will know yours. I will tell you of ancient monuments and fire-starter queens. I will tell you of spice groves, velvet capes, lost empires and future glories. There are things I may not tell you yet...but all in good time.

I know that you have been looking for me, but I have been with you all along. I would never leave your side. Only open your eyes and turn your head and there I will be.

Don't you see the signs? My darling, you have been sleeping. Your eyes have been closed to the world, you have been cast adrift. You have been asking the world who you are but it is not the world's place to tell you. Only you can know. Only you *do* know.

I am here to guide you. I leave my tales scattered like breadcrumbs upon the trails of your heart. I have spent your entire existence studying the etchings on your soul. I have seen glimpses of what will come for you. I have also feared for you. I have grieved to see you floundering, rootless. When I know with everything in me that all you have ever wanted or needed has been within you. It is embedded like dust in your skin, like marrow in your bones. From your beginnings, from mine and my mother's. To the dirt from where we sprang and someday shall return.

Now, my darling...

You must awaken.

The Girl Who Awakes

Where have you been? I've been calling you.

I must have fallen asleep... Mammisho...

Abet, inatey?

Wedé bait inime'les.

The Queens of Meroë

THE DIARY OF JOHN DALTON

TRANSCRIBED (FOR THE FIRST TIME) BY SIMWA TESEMAⁱ
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TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

The Diary of John Dalton is not new to academia. Since its discovery by Sudanese fishermen over thirty-five years ago, it has been the subject, in fact, of much discussion and discord. Whether the text was what it seemed to be – that is to say, a true first-hand account of what transpired on the Island of Ethiopia – or what many suspected it to be – a fictional work created as part of an elaborate hoax, was for a time at the heart of public discourse. The complete mystery surrounding Ethiopia after its split from the African continent, the failure of all other expeditions to reach the newly-formed island, the sometimes fantastical accounts within the text itself, and the ignoble past of its writer have, to date, all worked against the diary in its bid for respectability. Recent events, however, have cast a new light upon the work and proved that it is worthy of further investigation.

But before there was John Dalton's Diary, there was Ethiopia's cataclysmic Rift Valley split. The tragedy had cleaved the rock-hewn Biete Medhane Alem^{mii} church in twain, rearranged the face of the globe, created miles of coastline, killed millions and displaced countless more. In the weeks that followed, the nations of the world regrouped from the tragedy, formed planning committees, and saw to it that two of five planned aid ships were stocked and staffed, ready to sail towards the newly-formed island. The *Justice* and the *Spirit Pacification* were the first ships to cross the Sea of Ethiopia and, until recently, the last. After their twisted and mangled wreckage, the gorged and gouged bodies of their crew washed up on the Sudanese coast, no further attempts to reach Ethiopia were made. The sea and, following the loss of several reconnaissance drones, the skies above it were deemed unsafe for travel and global announcements demarcated it as a no-go area. All efforts to regain communication or visual contact with the island failed. And in time the world lost interest in seeking to re-establish links with the island and turned to the more immediate and pressing concern of coping with the millions of desperate people its formation had displaced.

In a sense, this is where my personal history intersects with that of Ethiopia. My parents were amongst the millions that were left homeless by the disaster. Their families had fled Ethiopia when the earthquakes had begun to threaten the imminent split. They had met as undocumented night-shift workers in a chocolate packing plant in France, married in the migrant camp on the same night they had been smuggled aboard a lorry, honeymooned in the Channel Tunnel – en route to England. By the time I was born, nearly three years later, my parents had settled into the little apartment above their corner shop on the outskirts of Manchester. As a child of the Ethiopian Exodus, as it is now called, and a first generation Brit I struggled (as many do) to find a place for myself in my new homeland. There were many of us in Manchester, and we knew each other on sight – the children of the rift, and soon enough others learned to recognise us as well. We drifted

together and apart as political pressure and social discord buffeted us. As our numbers grew, so did the sense that we had overstayed our welcome and, yet, we had nowhere else to go. We were a people in limbo, neither here nor there. Ghosts shimmering on the edges of nothingness. The land of my ancestors was adrift on the ocean, concealed by electric storms and opaque fog. I was no-one. Of no place. Of between. It was my parents who grounded me with their stories of the Rift Valley split, survival, and hope. My mother, especially. The tales she told me – of home and other worlds, the traditions she invoked and instilled, the lessons she secreted into song – like medicine nestled in a sweet, formed the foundations of my personhood and self-worth. I imagined Ethiopia through her tales – memories of the long dead, flavours and perfumes, ethereal as smoke dispersing on a breeze – a shrine to break oneself against, a podium to raise oneself upon. From those days until these, I have devoted my life – personal and academic – to the study of that country that had been so vital to my existence and yet managed to remain a complete mystery to me.

About forty years ago now, and in conjunction with a team of other academics and artists of the Exodus, I founded *East of the Rift*, an umbrella organisation dedicated to the research, preservation and dissemination of the cultures of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. As then director of the Ethiopian Cultural Preservation Society, my chapter of *East*, I heard of the discovery of the diary nearly twenty-four hours before it hit the news. I flew immediately to Sudan to join the University of Khartoum research group assigned to authenticating, restoring and transcribing the text. The Diary of John Dalton had been discovered by construction workers along the newly settled coastline. A recent development boom had cluttered the area with all-inclusive resorts in various stages of completion and destroyed the thriving fishing industry that had sprouted up after the disaster.

The pages were loose, edges jagged where they had been torn free from a notebook, folded together vertically down the centre, stuffed and sealed in a plastic water bottle covered with barnacles and slimy with mould. It was a marvel. Incredibly well-preserved, but for a few places where condensation, time and wear had smudged or smeared the text. Extensive testing on the quality of the paper and the state of the plastic bottle had seemed to point to its authenticity as had research into its author. Records confirmed the existence of a John Dalton in Manchester, and of his travel to Khartoum after the split. Research also confirmed his arrest, trial, and subsequent acquittal for the brutal murder of Dawit Wolde Giorgis, another unfortunate child of the Ethiopian Exodus. In a case that had divided the nation and pitched it to the edge of upheaval, Dalton and two others had been convicted of a racially motivated attack on the teenager and son of immigrants. But a controversial plea bargain had allowed Dalton to go free after serving a mere year at HM Prison Manchester, commonly referred to as Strangeways. News of his release had been followed

immediately with that of his disappearance. By the time investigative journalists had tracked him to Sudan, he had vanished, never to be heard from again. All these facts had corresponded with what was written in the diary. Everything then had seemed to point to its veracity. Everything, that is, but for the contents of the text itself.

The world that John Dalton describes – how he traversed the sea, travelling through the forbidden zone, the extraordinary people he met and the strange events that befell him on the island of Ethiopia – were simply too fantastical for many to credit. Every question we answered seemed to sprout another line of inquiry. The more we learned of John Dalton, the more his narrative seemed suspect, and yet there seemed to be no motivation behind the fabrication of a false diary, no author present to profit either by prestige or monetary gains. There was also, at least amongst us of the Exodus, a further knowledge that muddied the waters somewhat. It was a small enough thing, and yet in light of the diary it had taken on a sudden and unexpected importance and seemed very relevant indeed to the progress of our study. Ethiopian children play a traditional clapping game known as *Tegni Teneshi* or Sleep Awaken, that is accompanied by a nursery rhyme whose lyrics became of profound interest to our research team. I remember vividly playing *Tegni Teneshi* with my mother, sitting in our little kitchen to keep warm as it drizzled outside, moving my arms and hands in mirror image to hers, our voices loud and happy in the small space.

Two gates, two keys
The wax above and the gold beneath.
A Queen, a cross, and so she sleeps
While father awakens within the void.
A thousand worlds for the mother's flames
The daughter's waves cast out again.
Her earth, the forest, the beasts within
Break and fall and switch again.
Cleave the cross and raise the Queen
Two gates, two keys and the gold beneath.

The words to the song seemed to fit, in some strange and profound ways, with some of the events and stories referenced in the diary. This was not definitive proof that what John Dalton had written was fact, but it did lend credence to my growing belief that the diary was indeed a true one. A real, first-hand account of what had taken place on the island after the split. A text, then, of profound cultural and historical importance. On a more personal level, the diary also raised another hope,

long forgotten, from the ashes of my memories. There could still be survivors out there.

The publication of the Diary of John Dalton was met with much fanfare by the international press. Like a phoenix, Ethiopia once again arose within the global imagination. In the midst of all the turmoil surrounding the diary's release, the debates and conjectures never-ending, the countries of the Exodus enjoyed a sort of cultural revival. From the runways of London Fashion Week to the blockbusters of Hollywood, the cultural accoutrements of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia were suddenly de rigeur. The euphoria lasted about a year and culminated, in grand style, with the release of *Dalton*, a three hour saga, at the *Cannes Film Festival*. The Universal Studios' epic biopic had, rather infamously, bastardised the diary completely, casting the title character as a young aid worker on a grand mission of mercy to the island's zombie infested wilderness. The movie had been universally panned by critics and audiences alike and is today largely unavailable for purchase.

Since then, I have written extensively on the diary's place in history, arguing for its recognition as an integral thread to the tale of Ethiopia and its Exodus – whether it is a 'true' story or not. The Rift Valley split rippled out beyond the children of the Exodus, beyond geopolitical ramifications, development schemes and into the lives of individuals across the globe. John Dalton, whether he kept a diary or wrote a fictional story, whether he was a cold-blooded murderer or an unfortunate man twisted by the political jingoism of his time, was changed forever by the Rift Valley split, as surely as though he had been there to witness it first hand. The intersection of the diary with the song from *Tegni Teneshi*, the wealth of cultural information within the text and the complicated history of its author all serve to highlight the significance of the work as a historical relic. For more critical work on the relevancy of personal account to historical record and the intersectionality between truth and fiction, I recommend Mignotte Mekuria Marru's 'The Mother(Land) through Narrative and Nostalgia: The Role Stories Play in the Crafting of Imagined (Exiled) Communities'.

My work in this field has often seemed like an uphill battle, but a rewarding one, nonetheless. But in light of recent events, it seems as though my work has only just begun. It is a pleasure now to be able to witness the release of this anniversary edition of John Dalton's Diary, and I must admit a marvellous and wonderful vindication. The amateur footage filmed by tourists from the beaches of the *Nile Rift Resort* has breathed new life into this extraordinary tale. I will never forget seeing the news broadcast, not as long as I live.

I had been running on autopilot, rushing through my usual morning routine, half watching the newscasters on the TV – when there it was. Breaking news. The shaky amateur footage blurring in and out. A savage sea drowning in a vast fog that surged forward and was buffeted aside by howling winds. Concealing and revealing in turns. And what it revealed – *what you are seeing is*

one of many videos being shared, this one taken by Ousmane Diop, a Senegalese tourist staying at the Nile Rift Resort overlooking the Sea of Ethiopia... But I could hardly fathom what was being said. I could only cross the room and stand watching with my hands folded over my heart. The video adjusts, the image clears. The fog fades and a shadow looms. A great vessel. A figure, straight and still. There for an instant and gone in the next... proof that there are survivors...

Simwa Tesema
London

Teshagereh beelut queybahren telateh
Alula teqota, nededeh indesatih
Chan aleh ferehsayn, welwel goradayn
Awred kegirgidah tor inna gashayn
Manim iynekatim wuditoon agerayn

Alula Pankurst^{iv}

June 7th

It is the music I remember. The sounds coalescing into song. The rushing of my blood, the pounding of my heart, the humming in my ears. The whispers and whimpers. The thuds. Bone and asphalt and sirens. One long drawn out note. The rhythms of my nightmares. It sings to me in my silences, underscores my conversations. Discordant, without mercy. Without end. It plays for me now, drowning out the roar of the plane's engines. Pressing me down, inexorably. Battling the lift of the jet engines, the call of the unknown. And I sit. Hunched. Ruined. A broken thing. Named and shamed. The music swells, hovers like a stench. Lingers like an omen. A hand upon my shoulder, a shadow at my back. It has crowned me Damocles and singed my nerves with the screech of violins. John Dalton no longer lives in this body. That person is long gone. I am what is left. The residue at the bottom of the glass. The sludge that remains once the water has drained away. It is all clear to me now and I have accepted it. I know what I am. So, here I sit. Giving in to the very beast that haunts me. They say the only way out, is through. So be it, then. I will traverse these bars and count the beats of my madness. I will go where I am led. I will do what I must. Will do everything and anything at all. Just, God please, let this music end.

They have dimmed the lights. We are supposed to pretend it is night. The lady beside me is snoring softly. I can see her slumping sideways from the corner of my eye. Our interactions so far have been polite but I can tell that she is beginning to lose patience with me. But what can I do when the familiar cramping seizes my belly, when the heat rushes over me and the bile gathers in my throat? What choice do I have but to push past her in a panic and flee down the aisle, praying all the way that the toilets are unoccupied? I would rather not retch into the paper bag for all to see. Not yet, at least. I've programmed my little personal screen to track the flight. The little white plane seems to hover, unmoving, over the Mediterranean Sea. The sight fills me with relief. I know what I am, so I can admit to my cowardice now. I feel as though I am fragmenting into atoms, shivering into non-existence, vanishing into a state of pure emotion. Of one emotion: terror. But that static map with that motionless plane grounds me. I can pretend that I am suspended in the heavens, frozen in time. I can imagine that I have disappeared into the fold between my yesterdays and my tomorrows. No final judgement, no journey, no life, no death. Only this plane. A white dot frozen over a blue smear. 8 hours and 35 minutes to be nowhere and no one.

June 8th

I hate to fall asleep in public but I must have dozed between bouts of roiling nausea. I was lucky this time. I awoke with the screams bubbling up in my throat, clamouring to break free, and I bit my lips until they bled, until the panic subsided. The effort cost me dearly. I've been forced to use my sick bag. My ears were burning as I handed the sloshing bag apologetically to the steward and asked for another. Just in case. The poor woman beside me has turned her entire body away from me now. She's practically crawling into the aisle in her not-so-subtle effort to put some distance between us. It's humiliating as all hell but I understand completely. It is natural to recoil from the grotesque. From the repulsive. I could tell her that I used to be human, as normal as she, but I am not sure if even that is true. And yet, I must have been. Once.

The captain has made his announcement but I can't stop staring at the little two-dimensional airplane on the screen. The symbol for us. We are circling over our destination but on the map, we hover unmoving over Sudan. Khartoum, the airport, the whole universe awaits below. It is a new map, updated since the disaster. The world has moved on. The jagged edges of Sudan's newly-formed eastern coast are lined with blue. The world's youngest sea. It would have been something to fly over it, to see from above the storm-tossed waves and concealing mists. To catch a glimpse, perhaps, of the landmass hidden beneath the perpetual storms. The world's newest island. It could have been a fairytale if it weren't all so tragic. As it is, all travel to the island or through its waters has been prohibited indefinitely. And yet, it is where I must go.

June 9th

I am a fool. A hopeless creature always ploughing further into disaster. I have very little with me. A lifetime of worldly possessions has not translated into much money. Worthless. My possessions, my intentions. All of them. Just worthless. My hotel room is tiny. A cot, a sink, a table, and a chair battle for space. There is only room for me on the bed. But the view from the window by my deflated pillow is spectacular. The ramshackle temporary shoreline spreads out in a vast panorama across the street from my hotel. The stony coastline is cluttered with fishing boats. The people congregate and disperse in waves. Buying, selling, loitering about, striding purposefully. The cheerful cacophony of their activity wafts across to me on the warm breeze. The tinkling of bells added to my eternal funeral march of whimpers and bone.

June 12th

I've forced myself to sit outside, amongst people. I must resist the urge to hide away if I'm going to have any chance of finding a boat. I need to approach strangers, interrupt conversations, insist on myself. Someone here will be willing. I am sure of it. There is always someone. But I've already walked up and down amongst the fishing boats. Made an idiot of myself a hundred times, rifling through my notes, fighting nausea. The piece of paper with my request written in Arabic, French, and Amharic is already creased and smudged from passing between a hundred curious hands. And every time, the same dumbfounded expressions – as though I were both a madman and a fool – the same laughing refusals. None of the fishermen had stayed long enough to even hear how much I could pay for their help. Is what I want even possible? For nearly a year after the disaster, mangled wreckage and mutilated bodies washed up onto these very beaches. I read that they sometimes still do, but no longer the steel of international rescue ships and the blue-tinged bodies of white aid workers. No one has tried to cross the Sea of Ethiopia for years now, as far as I know. Now it is Ethiopians, Somalians, Eritreans, and Djiboutians that they find draped over the stones. Sometimes whole. More often, not. But the dead testify for the living. There are still survivors out there. I am certain. I imagine them beyond the horizon, where the sky is charged an eternal grey.

June 15th

His name is Ibrahim. Everything about him is long and narrow. Thin nose, pinched lips, oval face. His loose white robe billowed over his lanky form, revealing slender animated hands and broad feet in leather sandals. His gold aviator sunglasses complemented the embroidered cap perched at a jaunty angle over his ear. I gazed at my own reflection as he spoke, flashing dimples and the gap between his front teeth. I am to meet him tomorrow at a shisha bar across town.

June 16th

Breakfast in the cluttered little restaurant outside my hotel. The waitress smiled at me and named the dish as she lowered it. Shahan ful. Everyone is practising their English. Only I am leaving it behind. She used her phone to translate some words. Fava bean paste with onions, tomatoes and hot

peppers. Yoghurt, berbere^v, and feta cheese. Amongst all the English, an Amharic word I knew. I couldn't help it. I spoke without thinking, pleased with myself like an idiot. She had smiled at my recognition, a strange tilt of half her lips. 'I was from there.' That is what she said. I ducked my head and said nothing until she took the hint and left my side. Now the food is sitting at my elbow, untouched, as I write this. Waiting for my stomach to stop churning. To my right, the Sea of Ethiopia. Its waters are cobalt blue, never at rest. The kind of sea you imagine breaking on cliffs in icy lands to the north. It's been five years since this sea was formed, and yet you can sense the hesitancy in the construction of the port further down the coast. The land here is still uncertain, could give way at any moment. The people who work here, fishermen, day labourers, business people, all do so at their own risk. The wealthy, meanwhile, have begun constructing their holiday homes and luxury hotels further inland where the scientists predict the secondary fault would emerge, creating a more lasting beach. Just behind my hotel, in fact. It is strange to think that even where I sit now could soon be under the sea. And me with it. Skin washed away, bones rubbed smooth, just drifting in the void. In a silence with no song.

Ibrahim is the most genial fellow. And yet, I can't help feeling as though I am being herded. As though he is ten steps ahead of me, spinning webs from the threads of my desperation. What he can't know is that I am a man with nothing to lose. The fear he sees in my eyes, is a vestige of what I used to be. My cells clinging to the tattered remnants of my humanity. There is no going back for me. There is only Ethiopia. And I will gladly sell my soul to Satan, trust my well-being to tricksters, sacrifice what is left of my dignity and honour to get there. And Ibrahim of the gold aviators says he will take me. I am to meet him well before dawn in two days at Zuleika's Hair Salon down the street from my hotel.

June 18th

He has told me to wait. Told me to keep low. The ocean draws back and roars forth. The sound is eerie without the sight to ground it. But the moon has hidden behind the clouds. My little pen light illuminates a word at a time. Just enough and no more. Now that I am here, now that I am sitting on these rocks, poised on the edge of this abyss – I find that all is stillness. All is letting go. The creeping bass and jostling crescendos of my nightmares, the music of blood and agony that has underscored all my moments since THAT moment, has fallen silent. Simply faded into the utter stillness of this out-flung, pre-fall instant. And it's the strangest thing but all I can think is:

Well, in Whoville they say – that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day.^{vi}

June 19th

It is an odd sensation. Being fully cognisant of the fact that you are in danger, every nerve ending screaming out in foreboding, but completely unable to veer off the path you are travelling. I had expected little. This is worse. Nothing is as Ibrahim said. He is gone now anyway. Gold sunglasses glinting in the glare of the flashlight as he counted out my money. Now, the rising sun has revealed everything. The little battered fishing boat creaks as it sputters in gasps and groans across the water. Scarlet swathes of rust bubble and burst through the faded pea green paint like festering wounds. Wani and Dahab, who pilot the craft, say nothing to me and whisper much to each other. And all around us, the surging blue-black sea.

June 23rd

It settled over us quite suddenly. One minute – a breeze, the next – this. This quietness. The winds have stopped abruptly. The black sky is low above us, cloudless, splattered with stars from one horizon to the other. The sea has become as still as a sheet of glass. We are floating uselessly. A rubber duck in a titan's cosmic bathtub. I can't even explain it. It is so silent. On the boat and all around, the universe is holding its breath. But every few seconds a blaze of lightning tears across the sky. There is no accompanying thunder. Only quiet. Only lightning. Flashes of light issuing from a dark void. Over and over. Let me count the seconds between them. 5 seconds. 8. 12. 3. 7. 20. 5. The air feels electric. It is warm but I'm covered in goosebumps. My hair is standing on end. Literally. There is something – something – I can't say what, only that I am scared. I'm so scared. I've never seen anything like this. Lightning, endless and forever. No thunder. No wind. No waves. Only the threat of sizzling light. The threat of – I don't know. This is just beyond words. The sea is so still. The sea is so endless. How is it that I can feel so claustrophobic, so trapped?

June 27th

There is justice in this. I will swallow my fears, my sorrows, my pains until my belly swells with them. It is no less than I deserve. THIS is my penance. I SHOULD be torn asunder by cruelty, cast aside and betrayed. It is only the universe righting itself. This time, the bones being ground into dust were mine and the agony, even now, floods me with relief. It is a madman's salve. It cures nothing but it distracts from worse agonies and I am grateful. This life raft, littered with the upturned contents of my rucksack, misted with my blood, more duct tape than plastic. This sea, lapping me inexorably eastwards, stretching out from my elbows to infinity, and flickering with indistinct shadows. This orange and purple painted sky, with a golden orb rising from it on one side like a marker to my destination and to the other, a tiny green dot disappearing over the horizon. This pathetic creature, so tired, so weak, and so very alone.

June 28th

I passed the night in utter darkness. Starting at every noise, conjuring monsters from shadows, gripping the insubstantial float of plastic and tape with all my strength.

I will survive this journey. I will see Ethiopia.

I will survive this journey. I will see Ethiopia.

I will survive this journey. I will see Ethiopia.

I will survive this journey. I will see Ethiopia.

I will survive this journey. I will see Ethiopia.

I will survive this journey. I will see Ethiopia.

I will survive this journey. I will see Ethiopia.

July 2nd

It would be too funny if I died just now. If this life raft were to wash up onto the Ethiopian shore carrying my desiccated flesh and sun-bleached bones. Or perhaps it'd float back to Sudan and they'd find my bloated corpse there amongst the fishing boats. Perhaps Dahab and Wani would see me and know that they had rushed me to my end. Then maybe the cycle would repeat. Perhaps they too would seek absolution across a sea... But that is a dream. I won't be missed nor mourned. I can just

imagine my epitaph... Here lies John Dalton: was no one, died nowhere.

July 5th

Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink

July 8th

.....rain, thick splatters.....down, sideways.....violent ricochet. The.....surging in.....threatening to pitch me overboard.....Bailing.....slate blue.....can't believe.....far.....it there.....must.....^{vii}

July 9th

These pages are still damp, this life raft is still afloat, I am still alive, and the vast island still stretches out before my eyes. I breathed her name past cracked lips like an incantation and she awakened and rose up from the sea. Ethiopia.

July 10th

I dreamt of that night again and awoke weeping into the dirt. I must have slept for hours, the whole night through. My rucksack was still plastered to my back, trickling icy water down my spine. The life raft slumbers now, lost forever, somewhere at the bottom of that great frothing sea.

July 11th

I have yet to see another soul but still a vague disquiet is blooming in my chest. A notion dancing on the edges of my consciousness. The sense that I am not alone. The gentle rustle of leaves, the crack of a twig, the sudden break in the even fall of raindrops. A presence like an anchor around my throat

– heavy, malignant, and angry. Everything in me wants to flee, to take off running and never stop. But I've forced myself to do just the opposite. I've found a little cave carved into a rocky hillside shielded by trees. It hasn't stopped raining since I got here so it was very difficult finding wood dry enough to start a fire, but I finally managed, though it required the sacrifice of some pages from this notebook. I have drunk to my heart's content and left my collapsible water bottle outside to refill, but now it is hunger that consumes me. My little cave sympathetically echoes my stomach's rumbles and groans, doubling my discomfort. Outside there are other noises. Layered beneath the raindrops. And some of the sounds are – I don't know. Strange. I find myself straining to hear past the rain. Listening for...something to come after me. I feel as though this place is aware. As though it sees me as clearly as I see it. As though the forest, this very land, knows I am here.

July 13th

I must have walked for miles, through the lush countryside. My damp trainers have rubbed my feet raw, peeling skin and raising blisters. I've found what look like the remains of a once sizeable village. The place is deserted, forlorn-looking under the rain's steady drizzle. Tangled with the vines of the encroaching forest. The few huts still standing are sagging beneath the weight of dead leaves and gathered water. I can see most of the village from where I'm sitting in the doorway of a half demolished hut. The more I look at this place, the more it looks as though someone or something ripped through it in a destructive frenzy. There is a sense of turmoil still shivering in the air here. Something more than the disaster of Ethiopia's split from the mainland. The carnage here has been more recently wrought. Broken pottery, shredded fabric, strewn hay, overturned earth. The scene is rife with tragedy. There was enough debris in my hut to build a small fire but it sizzles and smokes with the wind whistling in through the half-collapsed wall, and the rain dripping down from the damaged thatching above. The guttering flames cast contorted shadows, deepen contours, and paint the scene with sadness. It is as though this village has been in stasis, and now, I with it. This is a dwelling for the dead. I say this with certainty. There are ghosts here. It is their cries that haunt this place. But for my own sanity and because I have no choice but to pass the night here, I must believe that whatever passed through here is long gone now. That I do not hear the rustling and growling vibrating from the forests, that I do not see the eyes glowing out at me from the concealing foliage. I must believe that I am not coming apart at the seams, that I am not the loneliest I have ever been. Ethiopia alone had a population of about 100 million at the time of the split. I must believe that they are still out there. That someone is. Please, God, let me find some people tomorrow. Some other

living soul. I feel alone in all the world. Beset on all sides by monsters. Watched. Those eyes. They are waiting for me to fall asleep. Waiting for my fire to die. Those eyes, blinking in and out of existence. Shifting closer with the descending, saturating darkness. Those eyes – I'll go mad, I know it. I'll just – NO.

EVERYTHING IS FINE. EVERYTHING IS FINE. I WILL SURVIVE THIS. THERE IS NOTHING, NOTHING OUT THERE. I AM ALONE. BUT FOR THE TREES AND THE WIND AND THE RAIN. ALL ELSE IS JUST MY IMAGINATION GOING MAD JUST MY IMAGINATION. IT MUST ALMOST BE SUNRISE. ALMOST SUNRISE. PLEASE, PLEASE. SUNRISE.

July 14th

I did not sleep last night. I could not. There is something here that should not be. I had known there would be devastation, but this menacing presence – this sensation of being in the eye of the storm, of being frozen in the path of an encroaching catastrophe – I am wholly unprepared for. It is the music of my nightmares projected out into the world. The very trees and earth are imbued with the agonizing malevolence of my memories. This land has risen up against me.

July 16th

Reading now what I wrote above, I can hardly imagine my earlier panic. I now exist in an entirely different realm. I am ensconced in a blanket of tranquillity. Of stillness and well-being. I have been saved. Pulled back from the gaping abyss of my madness. Let me tell you what happened (who are you? Strange how I write when I write to myself) after I left the desolate village. It was late in the evening. I was still alone. Starving and on the edge of collapse. I was losing hope. I can't say now, from this blissful state, exactly how I felt then. Doomed. Petrified. Desperate. Heartsick. The sun was setting, colouring the sky and casting the countryside in sepia tones. I was in a valley, dragging myself painfully up a slight incline. I happened to glance up and there it was. Framed against the orange and purple sky, motionless in contradiction to the fast skittering clouds and strange rising mist – a shape. Small and indistinct. I thought it at first a tree, stunted in growth, twisted and bent from years of pounding rain. Then the shape became two, and six spindly legs emerged. Down from

the fog-clad jagged peaks, to the valley in which I stood trembling, mumbled prayers falling from my lips, tears of hope pooling in my eyes. Then I saw. Not a dream. But a reality. An old man, leading an old horse. My saviour. My salvation.

I'm looking at him now. He is sitting across from me. Between us is the crackling fire he has built. All around us is the aura of safety that he has woven. I know it is a fragile illusion. My logical mind tells me, even now, that there is something out there in the forests beyond the warm pool of light cast by our little fire. And yet, here I feel safe. And for this instant, with food in my belly and heat on my face – I want to believe. No – I choose to believe. I do believe. For now at least, I am safe. Let me try to describe him as I am seeing him now. I want to remember this. He is a small man. He is slender but tautly muscled in that special way only countryside people seem to have. His skin is a deep brown with golden undertones. His face is lean, with the skin close to the bone. High cheekbones. A broad forehead. A long thin hawk of a nose. Deep set eyes – sunken. Black. A thick black puff of an afro crowns his head, streaked with silver, white and grey. At his nape, the hair has been braided into five sections. There it reaches his shoulders. He is wearing a white tunic with a rough leather belt. Faded, close-fitting blue shorts. They end just above his knobby knees. Leather sandals on strong-looking, long, lean feet. His horse grazes behind him. A faded grey stallion with white spots on its hind quarters. Silver mane. White tail. Lean, like its master. Weighted down with tasselled blankets and gold bridle settings. They had been a sight to behold. The man – he must be in his sixties or seventies, but obviously incredibly fit – with an AK47 slung casually over his shoulders, wrists thrown over either end, fingers down. The horse – looking for all the world as old as its master and standing just as tall. The pair had emerged from the mists and quite dazzled my already fraught senses. Frightened, weak, desperate and weary, I had stood before them. Stood and wept and said nothing. His thin hand had come down on my shoulder, slid to just above my elbow. Much stronger than I would have imagined for such a small man. And then he was pulling me along with him, back the way I had come. I allowed myself to be led, shattered and relieved.

He brought me here. To a place of safety. In the sheltered area he had chosen, not a drop of rain could reach us. He threw me a thick-woven cotton blanket. It envelops me now. Slightly musty. Comforting. Smells – strangely of sun, less strangely of horse and leather. He has knelt at my side, unwrapped several layers of cloth to reveal an *agelgil*^{viii}. The leather basket was meticulously worked through with brightly dyed strips of straw. Round with a pointed lid and leather straps to secure the two together. About 30cm in circumference. Beautiful. Overflowing with a wealth of dishes combined. All wrapped in *injera*^{ix} and sealed with the distinctive glossy leaves of the false

banana plant. Dark green. Vivid. My heart leapt at the sight. I know I was greedy. I ate way more than my rightful share, but I was half starved, reduced to my animal needs. And it didn't help that the food was delicious. Euphoric explosions of flavour on my tongue. That he did not stop me. That he said nothing at all. Only sat opposite me, on the other side of the fire. Only watched me and said nothing. Watched me, or the flames. I can't be sure. I should be trying to make conversation. I should be asking him questions. But the idea alone exhausts me.

July ? ← lost track, must verify.

So, so very much has happened since last I wrote. It all started when a strong hand on my shoulder awoke me. My eyes opened onto darkness. The fire had gone out. I sat up. There was a rustle of cloth, a flare, an old rusted kerosene lantern exploded to life and revealed the old man's craggy form bent over mine. Those deep-set eyes lit from within, reflecting the dancing flame. He crooked a finger. Beckoned me to follow. His horse was saddled. I followed him, still wrapped in his blanket, pulling my rucksack on over the warm covering. He gestured for me to mount. I did. The darkness was unbelievable. Heavy. It saturated everything. Only the little orb of gold emanating from the lantern existed, flickering ominously against the tendrils of encroaching darkness. It slipped towards me in whorls when the light left me, receded when it returned. The old man held the lantern high above us with one hand, led the horse forward with the other. I will never forget it. The air felt thick. Still and cool at once. Beyond the flare of uncertain light, all was painted an unbroken, unyielding black.

I couldn't steady my mind. Was it the same night that I had closed my eyes to? Had an eternity passed? I could not tell you then. All I knew was that what was happening was meant to happen. I know it sounds insane that I could know such a thing. And yet, I was certain. None of this is happen-stance. There is a rhythm to life that I am just now beginning to understand. What I did, what I am doing, and what I will do... It was always written. The universe knew me long before I dared to know myself. I am KNOWN. Stripped naked and revealed. I followed the lines of my tale in complete surrender. And so we went, the old man, the silver horse, and I. Into the cool embrace of the night. Into the darkness that skittered and scratched, alive and ravenous, at the edges of the light. Eyes peered out like shards of crystal, blinked out in an instant. Jaws gaped, laughter sounded. Manic, high pitched and feral. Teeth flashed, sharp silver blades dripping with intent. And through it all, the old man had walked, slow and steady, leading his horse, the lantern swinging from his grasp.

I closed my eyes against the horrors clamouring towards me and was back there again. To that night, on that street, with those people. The sensation struck with a swiftness that took my breath away. A dagger pressing slowly into my heart, puncturing skin – layer by layer – bursting veins and slicing tendons, lodging on bone. I knew this music well. Woodwind to signal beginnings. My friends and I (when there was such a person as John Dalton), the terrible triad of tattered dreams. Discontentment and drinks. Perpetual sneers, broken hearts, lost souls and sour grapes. Brass for fateful decisions. A chance encounter to fan the flames. The madness, the exhilaration of violence. Pounding hearts, rushing blood, rising vitriol. Percussion. Where the human body itself is an instrument and its song is one of torment. After which, there is no going back. After which, there is no more me. Only the screech of bow on string. The unravelling of reason, the downfall of decency, the slow irrevocable collapse of my soul. I have been bleeding out ever since. Death by a thousand cuts.

I opened my eyes on a gasp, agony coursing like fire through my veins. In my stupor, I had started leaning back into the darkness, away from the light. I realised that the shadows had begun to whisper over my chest and jerked upright with a start. I don't know how long I sat, breathing hard and staring down at the bleeding cuts upon my chest. I gazed at the old man. Still trudging on. One slow, steady foot before the other. My hero. He amazed me. How long had he been walking? What strange world had we journeyed through? The old man stopped suddenly and gestured for me to dismount. I slipped out of the saddle without a word, my eyes glued to the pinpoint of light glowing out of the darkness ahead of us. It hovered, pale and distant, full of promise. The old man handed me the lantern, his features lit gold by its flame. It was at this instant that I realised that we had never spoken. He watched me as I hesitated to leave his side. Now I think, he watched me almost gravely. Sadly. Pointed towards the light. Pointed the way I must go. I turned from him, began walking away. Slowly, at first. Nearly running when the darkness surged and growled all around me. The glow before me widened, burning out into the night, lifting my heart. I turned back for just an instant and watched the old man being enveloped by the spreading darkness behind me. All too soon, he was lost within it. I stopped looking back. To be honest, I was afraid of what I'd see. The light before me widened out into a forest. I could make out some torches. Blindingly bright. Fading to low glows as my eyes adjusted slowly. I brushed past some trees. A clearing. But more than that... A community. People. I'll tell you the truth. I burst into tears when I saw them. Just stood there at the edge of the forest and wept like a child.

July ?

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You can get used to anything and I have grown accustomed to daily life here. To the cool mud walls and pitched thatch roof of the little hut I call home. To the particular and peculiar habits of my housemates. I wake up early and fold away my bedding in a bleary daze. Abebe is the gregarious one. He regales us with chatter as we stagger through the dissipating mists to our water barrel to wash. Girma is the stoic one. His temperament is that of a vast and calm plateau, unbroken by peaks or troughs. Together they have braided together the tattered strands of my sanity and restored me to some semblance of humanity. And even more – they have given me the power of speech. My Amharic is still very poor, but thanks to their tireless efforts, it is improving every day. We breakfast together (all of us lost souls *sans famille*) under the matronly eye of Aregash Balcha, who, without fail, declares us dangerously thin and overburdens our plates. We congregate, assess what needs doing, collect our assignments, and go about our tasks.

And sometimes, in the midst of all this regularity, a strange wind begins to blow, bending the treetops flat. And in its wake trails the baritone reverberation of some far-off roar, the uneven trembling of the ground, the sudden and complete silence of the forest. A second to fathom the cosmic shift, for our animal instincts to scent the tang of malice in the air. A moment of peace before the savage onslaught... Too many have been lost in this way. The earth rises up and gobbles them down. And they go upon the flames. We all exist in the fold between those two realms. Between life and death, normality and madness. An instant, a spin of the wheel, a quirk of fate is all that keeps us alive and off the funeral pyre. Everything can be destroyed in an instant. But then, I have always known that.

When I was a little kid, I could never have imagined what I would become, what unrelenting punishment life could inflict. The simplistic clarity of childhood weaves a vision of the world that is ripped asunder by time and experience. This is my penance. To live amongst Ethiopians. To hear their languages, eat their food, see their faces and be welcomed amongst them. And all the time knowing that I deserve none of their kindness. That I am guilty, guilty, guilty. A wretched beast, a foul creature. I am the Cuckoo in their nest. And I don't even have the decency to confess it, the courage to tell them the truth of who and what I am. I have not even spoken his name. Dawit Wolde Giorgis. It was Dawit Wolde Giorgis. He was seventeen. This was his country and these were his people. I will stand in his place, seek absolution through agony. But I am not alone in my suffering and this is not my story. These people have gathered in this camp from all corners of Ethiopia (this

complexity is not to be taken lightly, pre-Split Ethiopia was home to over eighty distinct ethnic groups, each with its own language and culture). A few have come from as far as Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea. What it has taken for them to survive the journey, what was lost along the way – these are the burdens they shoulder. The secrets they keep. There are no heroes or villains here, they tell me this themselves. Only shattered souls fleeing further pain.

On the matter of days:

The Ethiopian calendar contains thirteen months and runs seven years behind the Gregorian calendar. Each month contains thirty days, except for the last which has five days or six, if it's a leap year. The months are:

Ethiopian (Latin)	Gregorian	Holidays
መስከረም (Meskerrem)	September – October	1: Enkutatash/ New Year 17: Mesqel/ Finding of the True Cross 24: Arefa/ Eid-al-Adha/ Feast of the Sacrifice
ጥቅምት (Tekemt)	October – November	
ሐዳር (Hedar)	November – December	
ታሕሣስ (Tahsas)	December – January	25: Mehwhlead/ Birth of Prophet Muhammad 29: Gena/ Christmas
ጥር (Tirr)	January – February	11: Timket/ Epiphany
የካቲት (Yekatit)	February – March	23: Ye Adwa Dil/ Victory of Adwa
መጋቢት (Megabit)	March – April	
ሚያዝያ (Miaziah)	April – May	2: Siqlet/ Good Friday 4: Fasika/ Easter Sunday 27: Ye Arbegnoch Metasebya/ Patriot's Day
ግንቦት (Genbot)	May – June	

ሰኔ (Sene)	June – July	
ሐምሌ (Hamle)	July – August	10: Eid-al-Fitr/ End of Ramadan
ነሐሴ (Nehasey)	August - September	11: Buhay/ Boy's Day
ጳግሜን (Pagumey)	September	

Pagumey 2

Aregash talks rapidly while she works. She is a tiny woman, rail thin and always on her feet – either hard at work herself or conducting a chorus of rowdy youths to do her bidding. She must be in her eighties but it's nearly impossible to tell. Her husband – his picture reveals a tall man, slightly plump with gentle eyes and a slanting smile – died long before our current troubles. In her life she has birthed twelve children, three she lost as children, two as adults and five in the Rift Valley split and subsequent exodus to safety. She shares a home now with her two daughters, a son-in-law and three grandchildren. She can be found, every sunrise without fail, sitting on a low woven stool, her fingers flying nimbly over whatever task she has set herself. Whether it is fermenting kocho^{xi}, brewing tej^{xii}, or frying coffee beans, in our camp there is always something to be done and Aregash is of the old guard that draws pleasure from a task well done – no matter how menial the task itself might seem to others. And we all benefit by her hard work and generosity, for when Aregash works, she works for the common good, when she cooks she makes enough to be shared and when she chops, peels or fries she always has some spare to give away.

We cook together often. I double as taste-tester, a role of infinite pleasures, tilting my head to accept her gursha^{xiii} as I work. These new intimacies are like a balm to my soul. I can almost believe I am human again.

Aregash tells me that her name bears a tale. Her mother had been a formidable and unyielding young woman who had committed the unfortunate error of marrying an unremarkable man. The dissolute husband compounded his life of errors and failures by indulging in countless affairs and

squandering their hard-earned money. He was completely clueless as to the fact that his wife had discovered his many deceits and, her volatile temper ignited and her vaunted pride wounded, she was determined to bring her troubles to an end. But just as the woman was about to force the moment to its crisis, as she hovered at the point of no return – she discovered she was pregnant. Discovered that a whole other life now depended on the decisions she made. Her child would live, prosper, suffer or die by her choices. And so, everything changed. The overpowering young woman mellowed into a cautious and diplomatic mother, committed to resolving her marital difficulties for the sake of her child. She named her daughter Aregash, meaning 'you pacified', as a testament to a child's power over its mother.

Having spent quite some time with Aregash since I first arrived here, I've got to say that she may have calmed others but the woman is a veritable firebrand herself. Thankfully, it is mostly bluster and she gives way to laughter easily when embraced. It's hard to hold anything against a woman with such an excellent sense of humour.

Today I helped her prepare some food for tomorrow's most unusual occurrence. We are having a wedding – or whatever we can approximate with the very little at hand. It's rather sweet actually, although I admit at first I couldn't help but think – why bother? Why marry at a time like this? Now though, I think why not? The couple met during the exodus. He is from Djibouti and she is an Ethiopian of the Afar people. Her people were fleeing south and his west, both groups seeking to escape the violent wrath of the sea, and they had met somewhere along the juncture and travelled together ever since. A cow had been slaughtered for the special occasion and I chopped the meat into a coarse mince. Aregash is an Ethiopian of the Gurage people and a master at preparing kitfo, a signature dish of her ethnic group.

KITFO

Ingredients

Lean red meat, coarsely ground (about 1kg)

Qibay^{xiv}

Cardamom

Mitmita^{xv}

How to

Melt chunk of qibay in large pan

Add meat

Add about 2 teaspoons cardamom

Add 1 teaspoon salt

Add 1½ – 2 teaspoons mitmita

Stir briefly over heat, then stir off heat

Taste and re-spice as desired

* Do NOT overcook (best served medium to medium-rare)

The smell of the cooking perfumes my clothes all day. Comforting and cosy. It will always remind me of Aregash and our cooking fire, the musical lilt of her voice speaking in Soddo Kistane – her first language, Amharic (the national language of Ethiopia) being her second. She is teaching me a little but laughs too often at my mistakes for me to take her seriously. I think she teaches more for the pleasure it gives her, to hear the words spoken.

Yohannes, feyanehe?

Ei feyanehu.

Oh, I should say I have been renamed here. I am called Yohannes.

Pagumey 3

Wakjira, Mebrate and I rounded up the cattle that had gotten loose in the night. The side of their pen had been savaged, it is a miracle that they all survived. Mebrate and I were bringing up the rear of the little herd, shouting comments back and forth with Wakjira as he led the long-horned steer from the front. Cracking our whips over their swatting tails with confident flicks of the wrist (a skill gained after weeks of flogging myself bloody), half listening – as always – for a sudden shift in the wind, the whisper of danger. Then I realised, out of the blue, that I could name and prepare some of the dishes that the old man with the silver horse had shared with me. I can imagine his *agelgil* now, a veritable cornucopia of delights, and heaped within the layers of *injera*:

ATKILT WOT

Ingredients

½ cup qibay
4 carrots, thinly sliced
1 onion, thinly sliced
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon cumin
¼ teaspoon erd^{xvi}
½ cabbage, shredded
5 potatoes, peeled and cubed

How to

Heat qibay
Cook carrots, onion for a few minutes
Stir in salt, pepper, cumin, erd and cabbage and cook for until tender
Add the potatoes and cover
Leave cooking until potatoes are soft

MESIR WOT

Ingredients

¾ cup qibay
1½ onions, finely chopped
½ cup berbere
1 tablespoon peeled and puréed ginger
2 teaspoon puréed garlic
1 cup washed red lentils
3 cups water (add more as necessary)
½ salt

How to

Heat qibay

Add onions and cook, stirring constantly

Stir in berbere, ginger and garlic and cook, stirring constantly

Add lentils

Add water and bring to a boil

Then simmer, stirring often and adding water as needed until lentils form a thick stew

Stir in salt

GOMEN

Ingredients

1 large bunch collard greens, washed

1 cup water

¼ cup qibay

1 red onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 inch piece ginger, peeled and minced

2 hot peppers, seeded and minced

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon cardamom

How to

Boil water

Add collard greens, boil briskly

Drain, cool, and slice collard greens

Melt the qibay

Add onion, garlic, ginger, hot peppers and simmer, stirring occasionally

Add collard greens, water, salt, pepper and cardamom

Cook until most of the water has evaporated from the mixture

SHIRO WOT

Ingredients

½ cup shiro powder*

1 red onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
¼ cup qibay
1 teaspoon berbere
2½ cups water
salt (to taste)

How to

Sauté onion and garlic in qibay for a few minutes

Add berbere and a couple of tablespoons of water and simmer, stirring occasionally

Add the remaining water

Stir in shiro powder slowly

Let cook until shiro becomes smooth and thick

*Making shiro powder: Peas, lentils, broad beans, chickpeas: baked and ground into a powder. Add berbere, chopped garlic, shallots, rue, basil, oregano, ginger, fenugreek, cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, coriander, salt, bishop's weed. Bake and grind into a fine powder.

FOSSOLIA

Ingredients

3 tablespoons qibay
1 cup chopped onion
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 teaspoon erd
3 cups green beans, halved and with the ends removed
2 cups carrot, chopped into sticks
1 cup water
1 small tomato, diced
Salt (to taste)

How to

Heat qibay

Add onions, garlic and ginger and cook, stirring until softened

Add the diced tomatoes

Add the erd and stir

Add green beans and carrot and stir until softened

Add a little water to prevent the sauce from drying out

Leave to simmer, stirring occasionally, until liquid is absorbed and vegetables are very soft

Add salt to taste

Pagumey 4

We listened to the sound until we could not stand it any more.

For hours on end it had echoed through the quiet trees. It sounded like choked sobbing, or perhaps the gasps and grunts of a wounded animal. Impossible to tell. At times it seemed distinctly human and it was not unthinkable that some poor soul or souls had wounded themselves making their way towards us and to safety. Stragglers still joined the camp every now and then, just as others moved on, seeking lost families elsewhere. But the forest is a dangerous place at night, the edges of camp are cluttered with the grave markers of those who had been lost. The ashes of the dead are interned in clay pots and buried. The little wooden crosses festooned with personal tokens were clustered close together, rather economically but also...now I think of it, pragmatically.

I was sitting with Wakjira outside his family's hut, watching his younger brothers chasing one another around us. The longer the sound continued, the more we convinced ourselves it sounded human. We became certain that someone was out there, desperate, wounded and alone, crying out for help as we all stood about within earshot too uncertain to move.

And through it all, she had sat silently and diligently sharpening the blade of her dagger, the point of her spear. Zenebech. If this village were a jigsaw puzzle than she would be the missing centre piece. Vital and yet, completely unknown to me. There is something about her that inspires awe. And in a coward like me, a sense of danger, a warning to be cautious, a vague tremulous fear. The creeping terror that should our eyes lock, my two to her one, all my secrets would be revealed. That eye could pierce through my flesh, cut through my bone and see the sin branded on my heart, read the name that would indict me. Dawit Wolde Giorgis. But I've been lucky in that Zenebech is a solitary soul. She seems to hover at the edge of things. I have learned that she sleeps alone in the storage hut. I imagine her amongst the salvaged spices and weapons. Her and the shy cat meant to

guard our stores against vermin. She talks little and observes everything. But, to me at least, she is always there. A palpable presence. And sharpening her weapons, looking up every now and then, listening to the horrendous sobbing, she drew my gaze like a magnet.

When she stood, volunteers moved towards her as though she had spoken. The three she chose to accompany her into the forest armed themselves with the weapons she had been preparing. Tedeneq, who was forced to pry her niece from her knees in order to lift her spear. Mebrate, whose pained eyes were trained upon his weeping mother's angry back. Girma, who studiously avoided my seeking glances, his jaw clenched with determination. I watched the four as they shouldered their rifles and sheathed their daggers. I watched Zenebech lead them into the darkness beyond our camp's fires. Hours passed in silence until finally, weary, I went to bed.

I was awoken by hushed voices, rushing feet. Abebe and I hurried from our hut and stood with the others. Most of the fires had been extinguished but the sombre torch-lit procession was easy enough to spot. My heart trapped in my throat, I searched the crowd, half aware of Abebe's trembling hand on my shoulder. I spotted Girma first, his face bleak and streaked with blood but alive, thank God. I saw Tedeneq bursting from the crowd to embrace her little niece and realised who was missing. I heard Abebe cry out but it was muffled by the pounding in my ears. Zenebech was leading the group, knocking at Mebrate's hut, whispering to his mother, who opened the door and peered out sleepily. Then the guttural sobbing was tearing through the night. The woman had crumbled limply to the floor, tearing at her greying braids, beating at her chest, covering herself in the cool dirt she clawed madly from the earth, crawling to the inert body of the young man that had once been her son and was now merely rags, bone and blood.

Lije, lije, lije... She keened the words without end. My child, my child, my child.

Slowly the men and women around her began to weep. The gentle swell of sound rose above the village, gaining volume with each moment. I watched Zenebech kneeling in the dirt with her arms tight around the bereaved mother. Whispering, touching, calming. Drawing a broken soul back from the abyss.

What on earth could she be saying? I did not envy her her task. What on earth could be said?

I helped build the bonfire at the far edge of the clearing, downwind of the village. Others would be

helping to clean, re-assemble, and prepare the body as best as they are able, while others still helped by joining in the prayers for the young man's soul and seeing to the well-being and care of his mother.

This is the fourth funeral I have helped prepare for but my first Muslim one. All the previous ones had been Orthodox Christian ceremonies. Christianity in Ethiopia dates back to the first century AD making it one of the oldest Christian countries in the world and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, unique in many of its elements to this country alone, is the one most frequently practised. Sadly, the special mourning practices of all the different cultures here cannot be observed, there is neither the knowledge nor the space. Here, now, everyone goes upon the flames.

Mebrate means 'my light'. He was an abysmal cook, a devout Muslim, a good storyteller, an adequate hunter and a brilliant card shark. He and Abebe had taught me poker, laughing at my '*say-so*' face as they called it (all twitches and tells), never imagining the depth of secrets I was capable of keeping. It was he who had shown me how to flick a whip. I can see him now, eyebrow arched and arms folded, snorting every time I wounded myself. Then inviting me to dinner at his house, in rueful apology for his lack of patience. He had once told me that he had lost his wife, young son, and sanity during the exodus. But the man I had known had been all heart. Impatient, sure, but truly kind. Now his mother is all alone in the world. And the village is no closer to safety. His death has meant nothing.

We gathered around the funeral pyre and those who still had the heart to pray did so. A myriad of languages meshed into a low hum, Muslim and Christian prayers in Arabic, Ge'ez^{xvii}, Amarigna, Kistane, Oromigna, Tigrayna. Countless others I hadn't even learned to recognise yet. The unfamiliar words became a sort of sad music, set to the crack and crumble of flames and flesh.

Pagumey 5

Zenebech. Meaning 'she rained'. In my heart, I mistranslate it as 'she reigned'. It is a deliberate error.

She is the loneliest person I have ever encountered.

I see her from sun up till sun down, her long strides taking her from one chore to another. Well after

sunset, when the forests begin to glint and grumble with life, I have caught sight of her, sitting at the edges of camp encircled in shadows, her gaze lost amongst the trees, her sword glinting across her lap, and known that she would be the last to sleep and the first to awaken. She fights, she works, she eats but looking at her, I can't help but get the unnerving feeling that there is no soul sustaining her – as though what we were seeing of her was what was LEFT... I wonder what she could have passed through to make her this way. If, perhaps, her past was as haunted as mine.

Aregash tells me that in the olden days they would have called someone like Zenebech an 'arbegna' a patriot. Patriot, noun: a person who willingly shatters themselves into adequate foundation stones upon which others can build upon.

Funny though, how we all go about this in our own ways. We are all wounded here, but Zenebech is a raw gaping cut. It is almost painful to see, painful to be around. I wonder if she knows the effect she has on others. I wonder if that's why she mostly keeps to herself. Or if it's as simple as having nothing more to say to anyone?

Either way, I can always tell where she is in the village, or indeed if she is away. Her presence is a tangible thing, she is almost more felt than seen. She is like that night aboard Wani and Dahab's boat, when the lightning tore across the heavy silent skies and charged the earth with the promise of violence.

She must be nearing middle age and her physical stature is formidable. Tall, full-bodied, straight-backed. She wears an eye-patch over her right eye. I can tell that under the bitterness, beneath the finely wrought wrinkles and cold single stare, there lingered a face that had once been conventionally pretty. But no longer. Now... I can't describe it adequately. She is striking. Empty and encumbered, at once. Vibrating at the outer limits of human endurance.

We spoke for the first time today. Her voice is low, polite. She speaks English fluently but knowing how private she is, I will not hold the fact that she kept it secret against her. I stood by her side before the crumbled pile of ash that Mebrate had become. The flames were dying down, rising in lazy swirls and eddies of smoke.

You were a fool to come here, John, the only way out now is through the flames.

Meskerrem 1

A lifetime ago, surely. After the music of my madness had faded, and I had emerged from the scarlet fog and into the flashing blue lights, trailing viscera, malevolence and the tattered remains of my mind. It was the books that had kept me sane in that place called Strangeways. So odd that I remember now what I read then.

*My Sorrow, when she's here with me,
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the bare, the withered tree;
She walks the sodden pasture lane.^{xviii}*

Today was such a day. Where mourning and celebration co-mingled and past and present were toasted as one. In the distance, Mebrate's body was still being dealt with and every now and then the sound of his mother's low sobs could be heard. A melancholy undercurrent to the cheery crackle and pop of the chibo's towering flames. We gathered around the tall ceremonial bonfire, standing upon earth strewn with aromatic herbs, tall grasses, and bright yellow daisies. Their perfume burst underfoot, wafted overhead, with every step I took. Girma and I had gone with Zufan to collect the scented banquet from the fields, to scatter it in the huts and around the camp. Their names roll off the tongue. Ketema.^{xix} Ariti.^{xx} Tej Sar.^{xxi} An etan^{xxii} burned at Aregash's elbow as she watched over the jebena^{xxiii}, its sweet and heady scent unrolling in swirls of smoke to the heavens. We gathered around the large communal plates in little groups, gorging ourselves on wot^{xxiv}, downing tella^{xxv}, sipping buna^{xxvi}. The younger children had exhausted themselves singing door to door and exchanging little bundles of daisies for gifts of difo dabo^{xxvii}. They sat near the chibo, flirting with sleep, weaving the long blades of tej sar into elaborate rings and headbands, singing softly to no-one in particular.

Abebayehosh.

Lemlem.^{xxviii}

Aregash stood as the chibo crumbled into ashes and prayed over the gathering in the traditional Gurage way. Her words laced into a lyrical poem, each sentence she uttered was punctuated by a

chorus of voices chanting 'peace' in response. I understood little of the words, but the sentiment had been clear. Beautiful. In English, her words lose some of their resonance:

SHE: ...*May blessings rain down from above.*

WE: *Kare!*

SHE: *Rain down from above.*

WE: *Kare!*

SHE: *May they bubble up from below. May your path be strewn with wonders.*

WE: *Kare!*

SHE: *May you encounter only kindness and prosperity. May all obstacles crumble before you.*

WE: *Kare!*

SHE: *Crumble before you.*

We stood together, ensconced in perfume, under the star-studded sky. It was all too sad. For all its beauty the evening had felt like a farewell. A new year and a last supper, all at once. There had been too many gaps. Too many silences. This added to my sorrow. I couldn't help but feel that we had squandered what could turn out to be our last new year on earth. Still...for this night, at this moment: *Inquan l'addis amet abro aderesen.:^{xix}*

Meskerrem 3

Our camp was swarmed in the night. I huddled in my hut with the Girma and Abebe, shaking and tangled in my blankets as the raging sounds of destruction, the mad shrieks and roars tore through our village.

Snorting breaths stirred the dirt near the edges of the hut, frantic digging and snarling erupted just beyond my blankets, trying so desperately to reach me while I sat frozen, my skin contracting over muscle and bone, my hair rising with the electric air. Any second the crumble of wall, the rip of claws and teeth...

Instead the whistle of steel, a heavy thud and feet running. Bellowed commands. I knew her voice well by now. Zenebech.

Further away, tortured screams – both human and animal.

Meskerrem 7

Wakjira is an Ethiopian of the Oromo people, and my often-times shepherding companion. He's about my height, leanly built, always wearing low-slung jeans, green plastic flip-flops and an obviously favoured but sadly tattered Arsenal jersey. He peppers his Addis Ababa Amargina with English and Oromigna.

Akamjirta!

I greet him in the Oromo language every time we meet and it gives us both a kick each time. He slings his rifle over his shoulders and hangs his arms off either end, fingers and elbows hanging down loosely.

Oi oi, Yohan. That's how he always calls me. He endlessly argues with me about English football teams, conjectures as to their fates now. He asks about London, Manchester, about how the *Britishers*, as he calls us, are. Questions like: what's the difference between England, the U.K. and Great Britain? are easy to answer. Ones like: are we a friendly people? are less so. I find I am expected to speak for my entire country. The enormity of the responsibility has not passed me by. Nor the irony.

Still, we had bonded over our careful outings with the cattle and now that we have lost them all, I find that I will miss the socialising that went along with the chore.

Today we greeted each other with silent glances over the bloodied pulp and gore that was left of our precious long-horned cattle. The air, as though to spite us, is still and heavy. It stinks of decaying flesh and spilled blood. The strip of cloth I had tied around my nose and mouth did nothing to help.

I just managed to turn and rip the cloth from my lips before I was sick. I could feel Wakjira's lean hand on my shoulder as I wretched and sobbed into the blood-soaked earth. He stood silent and let me.

Meskerrem 11

Afwerq was a doctor in Asmara, Eritrea. He had a thriving practice, a loving wife and four adult but slightly 'wayward' children – his word not mine. A specialist in gynaecology and an avid campaigner for women's rights he had spoken at conferences hosted all over the world, been invited to lecture at top international universities and kept society with some of the most revered medical minds. He spent the day with me filling urns and digging little graves.

We were covered in dirt, streaked with sweat and speckled with no small amount of human ash. The work was emotionally exhausting, must have been physically strenuous for an older man. And yet Afwerq who had once been a doctor, a husband, a father and was now nothing, worked without complaint and with a quiet solemnity. Afwerq, whose name means 'mouth of gold', dug with the tears tracking down his cheeks and said nothing.

Meskerrem 13

I worked with Aregash today, taking stock of what remained of our food stores. There was not much left of Zenebech's hut. Great claw marks, deep and long, scored the collapsed wall, the sun-baked dirt. Grains and spices, sacks and tins were shredded and scattered about like confetti. Very little could be salvaged but I sifted through the debris diligently, passing whatever I found into Aregash's waiting hands. Machetes, rifles, daggers and spears. Vegetables, flour, sugar, and herbs. Aregash yanked urgently from my grasp two bulging plastic bags and carried them back to her hut at once. And while she was gone, I pulled free the dismembered head and hind legs of the cat that had guarded our stores against vermin.

We sat carefully sweeping together the scattered grains, gathering the mass in bright woven baskets and sifting them free of dirt with gentle up-flung arcs of our arms. It has not rained since that night our village was overrun. Our water reserves are low. I wonder how on earth any of us will ever reach the river just beyond the trees. Ever since the attack we have been under siege. Strange really. That the creatures should manage to overturn most of our water barrels. That they should destroy one hut and it happens to be our food and weapons store. I thought this as I watched grain and dirt rise together and fall apart.

There is intent in all this chaos. A malevolence that is...almost...sentient. The forest bristles with antagonism. Shivers with blood-lust.

Just beyond its reach, watched by a hundred glinting yellow eyes, I sat with Aregash and baked bread. Today's recipe:

AMBASHA

Ingredients

1 tbl active dry yeast*
1/4 cup warm water
2 tbl ground coriander
1 tsp ground cardamom
1/2 tsp white pepper
1 tsp ground fenugreek
2 tsp salt
1/3 cup vegetable oil
1 1/4 cup lukewarm water
5 cup unbleached flour
1 tbl cayenne pepper
2 tbl oil
1/4 tsp ground ginger
1 pinch ground cloves
1/8 tsp cinnamon

How To

Dissolve yeast in warm water for 10 minutes

Add coriander, cinnamon, white pepper, fenugreek, salt, vegetable oil, lukewarm water – stir well.

Slowly add the flour until a mass forms.

On a floured surface, knead the dough for 10 minutes or until it is smooth and tiny bubbles form.

Reserve a 1-inch piece of dough. With floured hands spread the dough out on an ungreased pan.

Using a sharp knife, score the dough in a design similar to the spokes of a bicycle wheel.

Place the reserved ball of dough in the centre of the scored dough. Cover and let rise one hour.

Bake on high heat until golden brown and the base sounds slightly hollow when tapped.
Combine warm water, cayenne, ginger, cloves and oil in a bowl and brush over top of warm bread.

* Making yeast: Take 1½ cup used potato boiling water. Add tablespoon sugar. Stir in flour until stiff. Cover and leave overnight in warm place – should be bubbly next morning. Add 1 cup flour and 1 cup water every day to keep yeast growing. When ready to use: spread mixture thin to dehydrate, crumble and store.

Meskerrem 17

I look at these people and a vast poignant sadness engulfs me. Children of various ages, wives and husbands, sons and daughters, grandparents, all clinging to the last vestiges of life. Yet, what choice do they have? There is no help coming from far away, no rescue ships overflowing with supplies and well-intentioned volunteers, no food rations sailing to earth on parachutes as dark metallic birds tear the clouds up with their wings.

No, for these people, there would be no rescue. They were, as they have always been – alone. Alone and determined to survive in this land that has always been theirs.

Their spirit is both awe inspiring and pitiful, I can't bear to dwell on it.

And then, all of a sudden, it struck me. I was piling wood outside Wakjira's home. It was between setting down the last log and turning to receive my blessings from his mother.

You were a fool to come here, John, the only way out now is through the flames.

The words came like a punch to my gut, like a noose tightening around my throat. Shadows and light skittered across my vision, rendering me blind. The ground seemed dangerously far away so I sank to the dirt on shaking legs.

Wakjira's mother tells me I sat shaking, with my wrists hanging limp at my side, sagging like a deflated balloon, unresponsive to her calls, her touches.

I am so much more than a fool. I am an abomination, a monster. A parasite. The full import of Zenebech's words finally hit me, sank like a rock to the pit of my soul and I was seized by convulsions. Retching, trembling, gasping for breath. She KNEW. Somehow... Knew what I had done, who I truly was. The small but crucial part I had played in the destruction of this land and its people. Dawit Wolde Giorgis. I remember he had worn an elaborate cross on a gold chain. I remember how the gold had been warm in my hands, how it had bitten into the smooth skin of his throat. Gold and brown and, finally, red. Blood and fire and madness.

Meskerrem 23

I haven't been well but I am a little better now. It has helped to fill my days with work, to go back to my usual duties, to focus on the necessities of everyday survival. She was right in the end, in her own way, even though her methods were— even though she made me feel—

Even though she dragged me from the bed I hadn't been able to leave for two days, even though she shook me like a rag doll with her hands clenched in my shirt. Powerful Zenebech. Formidable Zenebech. Omniscient Zenebech. Who had deciphered the garbled cries of my soul and knew how to silence them. The sight of her impassive face sent sweat trickling down my spine and I closed my eyes as her strength pitched me back and forth. Cowering to protect my head from her blows, tears and snot running unheeded down my face. Merciful Zenebech. Who purified me of my sins with pain. Who drew my blood and cut me free. Each indent of her fist upon my flesh bloomed with a purifying blend of agony and euphoria. I was being ground into dust. And my sins along with them. She humiliated me, shamed me, wounded me to the heart, outed me for a coward and birthed me anew.

You have done things you regret? We all have our secrets to keep, our burdens to bear. You want to break yourself upon the rock of your guilt? Now I have broken you. But you will not share in our resources while you wallow in your misery. Transcend your demons, John, or I will cast you out into the forest myself. I swear it.

I knew she would do it. Sentence me to death. Leave me to the monsters beyond the trees. But my life was not my own to throw away. I had come here to balance a debt. To pay back what I had stolen. Wise Zenebech who recalled me to my purpose.

Transcend, verb, to rise above or go beyond.

Meskerrem 24

The last of the village's coffee beans have been drying on a bit of outstretched tarp in the sun outside Aregash's house; we all gathered today for a traditional coffee ceremony to enjoy the last of the brew.

I helped stoke the fire and moved aside to allow Aregash to roast the beans on a metal plate over the flames, stirring vigorously and smoothly until they darkened to a deep, chocolate-brown colour and began to secrete a light oil.

I watched Aregash carry the metal plate around to all of us within the circle, wafting the gentle aroma of the roasting coffee in our faces. I received the fragrant smoke full in the face as she drifted past me and breathed deep of its scent.

The beans were ground into dust in a mortar and pestle while a jebena of water was set to boil on the flames. The coffee was added and we each received a little espresso cup of the midnight-black brew. I accepted a sprig of tenadam^{xxx} and twirled the vivid green plant in the drink.

I noticed how few refills of the jebena it took to provide coffee for us all. I saw how much our numbers had shrunk.

Meskerrem 26

I think it was an apology.

Zenebech invited me to the hut she shared with Negussie^{xxxi}, a chubby accountant with a toothbrush moustache and a carefully cultivated self-important air that gave way easily to utter panic. In the darkened corner that was her home she pointed out her possessions to me.

I am 38 years old and this is what remains of my life.

I recognized the two large, misshapen plastic bags immediately. Lopsided, full to the brim and gouged through by their sharp contents. The rest? A neatly folded little bundle of gabi^{xxxii} that must double as bedding. Four books. A cracked mug holding a toothbrush, a washing rag and a shard of soap.

The rest is only memories.

I will never forget the sight of those meagre belongings. The remains of a life...

I am frightened too, John, but this is all I have and I will fight to keep it. Our stories are being erased, our ways forgotten, our images wiped clean from the face of the earth, but here in our homeland we make our final stand. The fundamental truths and tales that are its soul are kept alive in the memories that each of us here carries within us. That is all Ethiopia has left and I will fight to maintain it.

The two plastic bags are beside me now. They are full of photos. Hundreds. Black and white. Colour. People. Landscapes. Moments frozen in time. Scores of faces, a family aged through generations in a cosmic flip book.

Her family.

Or rather, all that was left of it.

Meskerrem 29

It came over me again today. I was alone – that's what did it, I'm sure. The silence became too heavy, I could feel the world breathing around me. It was a deep, thrumming baritone. The sound gathered like a stone in my chest, right in the centre, and pressed down. I was a balloon, bulging dangerously, too full – too empty – I needed to scream to relieve the pressure, to save myself, but there were people nearby and I could not. So I sat quietly. Quite alone. Slowly disintegrating, my body, my consciousness, evaporating out into droplets. I want to say I was falling apart. Devolving

or evolving – hard to tell the difference sometimes – into atoms, into tiny planets of being. I was alone and it was dark and my thoughts were too many and all around me the earth was breathing. I was alone and I was looking at her photos – that's what did it, I'm sure.

Meskerrem 30

Zufan and Tedeneq are sisters. Zufan told me that they arrived from Addis Ababa with a tattered suitcase between them, bloody feet stuffed into wedges, extensions hanging in rows from their scalps and Jember, Zufan's little girl, strapped to her sister's back. Jember never speaks, she only looks up with huge soulful eyes and clings to the backs of her aunt's legs. Zufan speaks enough for all three of them. She told me that she had known her world would end by the stark imagery of her dreams. In them, she lost her gold and felt her foundations slip, she dropped a jug of milk and watched the liquid seep like blood into the dirt. From those dreams until now, she has lost her husband and her daughter clings to another.

Zufan is a study in contradictions. She fascinates me.

She sat between Tedeneq's legs, her wrists resting lightly on her sister's knees – that is when they were not held aloft in flight or fluttering to the cadence of her words – as the other woman braided her hair. Jovial. Cheerful. Light hearted. That is what Zufan is. I could have met her at a trendy bar or a hip café. Half her hair is braided sleekly against her skull, the other half a fly-away afro and so she becomes a half saint. Almost haloed. Jember stands behind her aunt, clinging with her thin arms wrapped like a vice around Tedeneq's neck.

Zufan reaches for her daughter and laughs as the girl dances away. Only I can see Zufan's eyes from where she is sitting. They are stricken. For a moment, her heart bleeds out through them and I am nearly overwhelmed by the depths of despair. I look away quickly – embarrassed to have seen it.

The little tragedies and the big ones. I realise they are all the same. This is life now.

There is still beauty in this, their names are like music to me:

Zufan = 'throne'

Tedeneq = 'may she be admired'

Jember = 'dawn'

Tekemt 5

There is nothing left.

The forests are alive all around us. The attacks on our camp occur almost nightly. The circle is closing. Our horizons narrow.

I watch our little food and water stores dwindle. The never-ending rains that had so bedevilled us would be welcome now.

When will someone say it?

We need to get the hell out of here while we can, before we are overcome entirely.

But the children. Jember. The old people. Aregash. Afwerq.

How many more of us will be set upon the flames?

Tekemt 7

I dreamt that I fled the village. That I went alone, stealing into the night. That I left these people, my rucksack bulging with their provisions. My wretched heart twisting my cowardice into heroism, my megalomania into logic. These sensations – so familiar, so comforting – soothed the clamouring of my conscience. I was thinking: Why should I die here? This is not my country and this is not my battle. These are not my people. Haven't I done enough? Haven't I balanced the scales? How long was I expected to suffer for my sins? I had forgotten myself in the crisis, embedding myself into the fabric of their lives out of necessity. It was time to pick myself free. Surely one person travelling alone would be safer than a group overburdened by the old, the young, the helpless and the infirm. I had delved, breathless, into the trees – came face to face with HIM. Dawit Wolde Giorgis. Just as I

had seen him last. Battered body, charred flesh.

I awoke with a start, sick with shame, dizzy with relief. My gabi, my housemates, my hut... Nothing had changed. The dream had been the garbled nonsense of a stressed subconscious. Nothing more. That John Dalton was long dead. My heart had not meant the horrible thoughts it had uttered in my dream. I hadn't meant any of it. I hadn't. These people had saved my body, redeemed my soul. They are my people now. Bound to me by ties even more profound than blood. What is out there will not spare me any more than it has spared them. There is no leaving here. There is no rescue coming. There is only this moment and the next. These people, as long as I survive...

Yes...Yohannes is in a state of transcendence...

Tekemt 8

The noise started deep down, a guttural rumbling that tore upwards in a yelp. The trees echoed with it.

It was not so late, there were still crickets out, scissoring their strange song.

I was standing with Wakjira. We distracted ourselves from the hunger gnawing at our bellies by kicking back and forth a makeshift football made of rolled up scraps of fabric and secured with twine.

I had other things to distract me as well.

Tomorrow you'll be coming with me into the forest.

Zenebech had told me that our river was no longer any good to us.

It is thick with bodies.

Those were her words. She said that we needed to find another source of water and more supplies quickly.

Zenebech gestured me to her hut. The packed dirt floor was silver with swords, spears, rifles. A tangled heap of death. She told me to choose. She explained that they had run out of ammunition the last time we were attacked. The rifles were now strictly for bludgeoning and bayoneting.

My heart sank down into the soles of my feet and bled out through my pores. A spectre loomed over me and I was icy cold in its shadow.

She told me to choose and told me that tomorrow I would be going with her into the forest. She told me to choose and told me that tomorrow I would be going with her into the forest. She told me to choose and told me that tomorrow I would be going with her into the forest.

She has sentenced me to death. I know it. I. Know. It. I. Know. It.

She shoved me forward but left her hand resting, fingers clasped firmly, over my shoulder. Her hand was large, strong, warm.

Was it possible to communicate strength through touch alone? No looks, no words. Just a warrior's hand. Just a warrior's strength.

Tomorrow you'll be coming with me into the forest. She had said. *With me.*

I would not be alone. I would be with HER. That meant something.

That meant everything.

I choose a spear. 'Tor' in Amarigna, the same word that is used for 'war'.

Tekemt 13

~~What I saw~~

~~The utter carnage~~

~~The forest has gone to the darkness. It is a graveyard now and~~

We lit the flames again tonight. Two bodies shared the bed of wood and fire.

Selamawete, whose name meant 'peaceful one', who I had only known as Mebrate's mother. Who I hadn't really known at all. Who had more than once welcomed me into her home and who we had found suspended from the low hanging branch of a towering avocado tree, a little three legged stool upended beneath her swaying feet, nearly swallowed up by grass and fog.

And the other...

The white gabi shrouded form looks nothing like the Wakjira I had known. The material is taut over his face, rendering him anonymous. It could be anyone.

Anyone else.

It should be.

It should be anyone else.

It should be me.

Oi oi, Yohan.

Oh, Wakjira... His name meant 'there is a God'.

But where?

There are beasts in the forest. Shadows and teeth, bristling fur that cuts like a blade. Snarls and yelps and shrill guffaws. Creeping into every pore of my being until I and the madness are one. The stench of blood singed into my nostrils until my lungs were permeated with it, my cells contaminated with the dust of another's eviscerated flesh.

God. God. God. Wakjira God.

Needless to say, there is no water, there is no food, there is only death.

Everything is ending.

Or perhaps, for me at least, the end began a long time ago. On that night when shame, struggle, hardship, failure and resentment had coalesced into fury. Buoyed by drink and bravado, indignation and hate. Imagining that all the evils in my life had been made flesh. Manifested as that slender boy with the gold chain. All my demons, taunting me from behind Dawit Wolde Giorgis' eyes. Maybe this is what happens after the end has passed. After the credits have rolled. This is the silence that follows.

Zenebech has told us to prepare. We break camp in three days.

Tekemt 15

I am wearing Wakjira's clothes. His family was kind enough to give them to me. All except his beloved Arsenal jersey. Its ashes now mingled with his in the rich dirt.

Abebe is laughing, elbow resting on his bent knee as he leans forward to capture a small pile of Girma's stones. They had dug the Gebeta^{xxxiii} playing board into the earth. Two parallel rows of six shallow depressions with an extra indent on either end. I'm sitting beside Girma, the mud wall of our hut cool against my back, my legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. I don't need to look to know that Girma is frowning. I don't need to ask to know that he is more bothered by Abebe's lack of sportsmanship than he is about his own defeat.

These are the things I will miss.

The moments of calm, this little oasis we carved for ourselves out of the chaos. This bubble of normalcy: iridescent, ethereal. Rendered more beautiful by its transience. The present is already freezing itself into candy-coloured snapshots in my mind, assembling albums to fortify my spirits in the times to come, building monuments to the memory of my happiness.

These are the things I will never forget.

So strange, I have dreaded going back into the forests since I emerged from them what feels like an eternity ago now. But the moment of reckoning has come and I am light as air. A feather adrift on a breeze. I know I will die. I've let go. I've given in. It is clinging to life that had made me so afraid. It all makes sense now that I have let go.

One step in front of the other, then, I will walk with these people. Carrying my memories, swallowing my grief, paying my debt. At last I have transcended. I will walk for the living and the dead. For Mebrate and Wakjira, Aregash and Afwerq. For the sisters and their child. The families left behind. For Zenebech and her photos and her calloused hand on my shoulder.

I understand now. What was it that she'd said?

I am frightened too, John, but this is all I have and I will fight to keep it.

They are all I have left and I will fight to keep them.

Tekemt 23

We are being corralled. Attacked always on this side or that, never both at once. How can it be so dark in the forests? And the rains have started again. I have been helping the others as much as I can. Carrying in the centre and fighting at the flanks.

Zenebech has been leading us. She is not wavering but things are very bad. We are all witness to the evidence our own eyes furnish us with. The danger is worse than we could ever have imagined. All the settlements near us are either putrid with melting corpses or haunted with the silence of abandonment.

We are clustered in a shallow cave in a rocky mountainside. We are all wet through. Our few provisions are nearly destroyed. The oldest and the youngest are bearing the brunt of the suffering.

I have been watching them trying to build a fire for much of our time here. Everything is too wet. I have torn them pages from my notebook, we've cut tufts of our hair, rubbed wood – all to no avail.

Aregash is shivering under her gabi. We all will be sleeping close tonight.

Well, all except Zenebech, I suppose. She is still sitting at the mouth of the cave, gazing out with her back to us – making no move to settle for the night.

I think I must join her.

Tekemt 27

Attacked

Blood

Running

Aregash fell

Went back for her

Chaos

Running

Shouts. Animal. Human.

People hurt. Badly hurt.

Sheltering now

Tekemt 29

The Dead:

Negussie Gebre-Medhin

Abebe Lemma

Zufan Habte-Giorgis

No fires.

Can't stop to bury them.

Bodies wrapped in gabis, piled over with rocks and earth

Their bodies will be eaten.
Already I can hear the creatures panting in our wake
Time to leave
I will carry Jember, Tedeneq barely able to stand as is

Hedar 1

Zenebech returned to our makeshift camp bathed in blood.
She dragged the body of one of the beasts behind her. A hyena? A lion? A mangled ape? It was hard to tell.
We cut it open, thinking to eat.
The stench came first.
The belly of the beast, though freshly slaughtered, swam with maggots.
Many retched, some whispered prayers, others began to weep as the reality of another hungry night set in.
But Zenebech only bared her teeth in an unsettling parody of a smile.
It made my skin crawl.
She is pacing back and forth outside now. The weather-beaten and wind-slanted hut we sheltered in seemed much larger without her. This village has been long abandoned.
We will not be safe here long either.

I find myself thinking about that old man who saved me once from the darkness so long ago. Is he even still living? If so, where is he now? Why doesn't he save us? Maybe we can find him? Maybe he could guide us to safety as he once did me. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

Hedar 4

Is it possible that our camp survived so far from others? Where is everyone else?

Abandoned settlements, demolished huts, hollowed out corpses. Everything is mouldering from the inside out.

There is no food. We haven't eaten in days. We are so... just so tired.

Hedar 15

I nearly died today.

And Zenebech saved me.

I nearly died today.

And Zenebech saved me.

I nearly died today.

But I didn't.

I didn't but –

The Dead:

Aregash Balcha

Hedar 23

We are hiding.

Chased, bloody, wounded.

Nowhere to go now.

Hedar 25

The Dead:

Afwerq Aman

Jember Biniyam

Girma Iskindir

I understand now. Her letter. What it all means. What she must have realised.

I see it all around me. In the atoms that quiver in the emptiness between things. I had been alone for so long. Much too long. Long enough to really see. To really understand. Life and death, legends and histories, man and beast, past and future. Everything is intertwined. Everything is one. I finally see it. And now that I know how to see, the gold beneath the wax near blinds me. All is revealed.

Their mark is misted over the landscape all around me. I see the shadows before the shapes emerge, the glowing eyes before the slashing claw, the –

The Queens.

This has always been about The Queens.

This has always been about Zenebech. How funny. How odd. Her story, her country's story, my story, Aregash's story. All one.

Life circles. Time circles. A lot has changed and yet nothing has.

At least now, sitting before the fire with the shadow of the lean silver horse looming over me, I can share these thoughts with the old man in his native tongue.

His deep-set eyes are so kind. He calls himself Shalemu.

I. I waited too long to return...

Where are we going, Zenebech?

That hasn't been up to us for a long time now, John.

What do you hope to find?

Whatever's left.

Why do you do that?

What?

Pretend that you have no dreams, no hopes. That you're not afraid like the rest of us.

Because I am afraid. Because if I speak more than two words to anyone my heart overflows with a million overwhelming emotions and I begin to drown. Because I can easily hope too much and be crushed in an instant beneath the weight of my disappointment. A broken heart will kill here just as viciously as a mauled one. I cannot allow myself to feel. I will not allow myself to drown... Maybe later... Later, I can stop and reflect on all that has been. For now, John, let us be content to put one foot in front of the other.

Later means hope of survival. Do you think we can? Survive I mean?

There are only two certainties in my heart at this moment. We will do everything in our power to survive this and as long as someone does, none of our efforts will have been in vain.

Zenebech, what is happening here? What does all this mean?

I am surprised that Aregash has not told you about The Queens. Didn't you know, John? We are tangled here in the unravelling tapestry of an ancient prophecy. I was told that when you first arrived at our camp you were delirious. Rambling that an old man had saved you when you were alone in the forest. You said that the darkness lapped up to you like waves and only the old man's light kept the demons at bay. Do you still believe those things? Now that you have healed. Now, after everything else you have seen.

I don't know what to believe anymore... No, that's not true. I guess...I don't *want* to believe.

But you do. As do I. Don't look so forlorn, I'm sure we're all quite sane. It is just this land. It seeps into you like a bedtime story as you drift between this world and the next, half heard by the brain but embedded forever in the heart... It called me back from decades and continents and kilometres away. Did I ever tell you that I lived half my life outside of Ethiopia? I studied, came of age and fell in love – all on foreign soil. I was a ship of exploration, on a voyage of discovery. I had always intended to return home. But time plays tricks. Three years turns into two more somewhere else, and so on and so forth until, suddenly, one day I realised I had started to de-materialise around the edges. I was beginning to splinter apart, losing cohesion – I had strayed too far from and gone too long without my life source, from the stories that had sustained me. Great chasms of loneliness began to criss-cross my heart. For the first time in my life I became aware of myself as an other, an interloper on foreign shores. I awoke from my dreams and saw myself as they saw me. I awoke and my being cried out for home. Where blood, legend and memory rooted me in significance.

Heartsick. Homesick. I missed the food, the languages, the petty arguments that had been ground into my skin like gold dust from birth, the mannerisms – both courtly and commonplace – that found an answering resonance in my arterial flow. I missed the comfort that came from returning to one's own home after a protracted visit to a polite stranger's residence. It became a fever with me, the desire to return, and finally – blissfully – I did. Six years later, the Rift Valley split and the nightmare began. Some would say that I waited too long to return... I say that I made it just in time. I am grateful that I could be here with my people, eating our food, hearing our languages, engaging in the usual discussions and debates. It agonises me to think that all of this could have ended...without my being able to experience it all one last time.

One last time? Do you mean before the end of this country or before the end...of...you?

Ethiopia will sleep...that is all...it will never end. It was born of stardust, has weathered through millennia, it will endure beyond me I am sure. In the million little things we'll leave behind, it will endure. Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia are no different. All that has fallen can be re-built. A new generation will arise out of our ashes... Perhaps, they will even have learned something from our mistakes and grown to greater moral dimensions... But for now, one foot in front of the other... Wake the others, we need to break camp. The silence has been deafening this past half hour. We are being stalked.

II. No one is coming for us.

Do you think there's any help coming?

There is too little sympathy in this world. Too little humanity. We are blind to our own crimes, too aware of the transgressions of others. Too unwilling to repent, to forgive. We cloak ourselves in logic and reason and wring our hearts dry of decency. No, John, I know there isn't any help coming. There are no resources here to exploit, no riches to make, no people to subjugate, no market to flood or sap or sanction. There is nothing left to draw the development tour with its headlining investors and its humanitarian opening acts. There are only people left. Human beings, battered and wounded, seeking the comfort of their fellow human...finding nothing but a vast wasteland of greed, apathy and hypocrisy... No one is coming for us, John. No one ever has and no one ever will. Let that sink into you. All the way in. Until something breaks a little to make room for the enormity of this loneliness. This is all there is. This is where we make our final stand...but we must make it alone. Our soil, our blood, our beasts, our penance – there is little outsiders can do for us now.

...the Ethiopians slept for nearly a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten...^{xxxiv} We've circled time, repeated history... Or at least it feels that way. As if we've done all this before.

I take it you've spoken to Aregash about The Queens? Well? What do you make of our bedtime stories?

It's an amazing legend. But – I mean... It can't possibly – is it – could it possibly be true?

Who's to say? All I can say for sure is that I have felt the madness, seen the devastation that demarks the path the creatures have taken. And I know you've heard them too. At night. The roars. The tremors they cause. What animal could make that sound?

But the idea of a battle between the modern world and an ancient –

You can think and believe whatever you wish. You will live...or die just as the next man. Remember, we are all just drifting in that place between worlds. We have been knocking at the gateways of far-off realms for aeons and finally something...someone from beyond has answered our hails.

Aregash said that this is divine punishment.

Tedeneq believes it is a chance for redemption.

She said that for Jember's sake, no doubt.

Perhaps...

What do you think this is?

Things collapse slowly, sometimes in increments imperceivable to the human eye. Like a towering mountain crumbling to ash, worn to a nub by swirling winds, beating rains and trudging feet. Compared to the universe, you and I and all humankind together, are as Mayflies. Our lives brief, our minds simple. We cannot fathom the ripples that flow out from our insignificant bodies, crossing the kilometres, disturbing the shore, nudging heavenly bodies this way and that. This is our moment of awareness. Our enlightenment. When we are all called to awaken. All called to rise. This is a reminder of our true place in the cosmic scope of things. A warning that we are rushing headlong towards our own destruction.

But isn't this destruction? The very definition of it?

Indeed, but something else has come of this. All the nonsense we clung to in the olden days, all the grievances we levelled against each other – we have buried those grudges now and healed those wounds. We are all too tired from running, all too weak from blood loss to quibble over our petty differences now.

You can find some good in this?

Once...after all this began...I awoke and I had nothing left. My entire universe had scattered like ash and I alone knelt amidst the ruins of the past. In the silence that closed around me I heard the screeching begin in the pits of my soul, bubble and burn in my throat, dash itself against the backs of my gritted teeth. I was eviscerated. Shattered. Dissolved. But I did not die... I did not die.

III. Why did you really come here?

Please, Zenebech. Don't talk –

Just... Just listen... I never told you that when I began to prepare for my return to Ethiopia after all those years away – I began to be afraid. A deep anxiety gripped me, a near panic engulfed me. It was on a quiet contemplative bus journey to my part-time job that I realised...I was afraid of having to live up to people's expectations. I had grown used to living far away from people who were invested enough in my welfare to censure my bad habits... I had been left for so many years to wallow in my own pit, shored up with ego and built on the quicksand of easy retreat. When I returned home all that freedom would be gone. People would expect things...expect better. And there would be a price to pay if I failed, not just on my account but on those of my family members and friends. I would be twining myself into a web, assimilating myself into a collective, fitting my joints and curves into a jigsaw puzzle, joining a family, growing up – and I was frightened to matter so suddenly, to have my being yanked from the shadows of inconsequence and thrust into the glaring limelight of life. While before, when I buckled I fell alone, in Ethiopia I would only be the first in a chain reaction and a whole world could collapse around me. I suppose that is the strength of unity. That is the essence of what it means for one's existence to truly matter. That is the power of home–

Why are you telling me this now? You're exhausting yourself when you should be resting. You're-

I'll be resting soon enough.

If that's a joke, it's a very poor one.

Poor John. You're afraid...again, aren't you? For me or for your...self?

I'm afraid for everyone and everything. I fear for the world.

Tell me, John...why did you really come here?

I... I came because... I... I came because I killed a man. His name was Dawit Wolde Giorgis. He was seventeen. One of millions that fled to safety after the Split. He wore a pea-green polo shirt, I remember, and trainers to match. A gold chain with an intricate cross. It had taken him three years to make the journey on foot, through dangers I can only now appreciate, to England. And I killed

him. For who he was, for what he had, for what I had imagined he'd taken from me. I killed him. I killed him. I killed him and I had never killed before. I killed him...but we died together... I...came because... I took a life and needed to give one in return... Because nothing could ever be the same, because the act had changed me, declared me a monster, rendering me inhuman, bestial and mad. I came here because after what I had done...there was nowhere else for me to go...

...John...

You said...you said that this land seeps into you like a bedtime story as you drift between this world and the next. This place that is a no man's land of in-betweens. Ancient history, current events. Impossible legends, possible realities. This place, interwoven with magic, twisting in agony... Where even a wretch such as I dreams of deliverance, and is granted hope... Isn't it possible... Don't you think... Can't I be saved?

Every...thing can be...redeem...

Zenebech? Zenebech? Open your eyes, listen to me. Please. Come on now.

I was...resting... Only...rest...

Please! Tell...besma'am^{xxxv}...tell me about how you survived after the Rift Valley split. You've never told me – Don't close your eyes again. Zenebech! This is all my fault. You shouldn't have come back for me. Now-

Don't...cry...Mammisho...

Mammisho...? What-? Zenebech? Zenebech?

IV. If one of us should survive, and that one should be you...

Dear John,

When you read this you will think I have left you. I want you to know that I have not abandoned you. Don't be afraid. You have everything you need to survive within you. This battle was never yours to begin with and now you must break free of it. I have left a bag packed with some things, a few of my pictures and other people's mementoes, I hope you will take them with you to remember us by. John, if one of us should survive, and that one should be you, you must do all you can to carry our memories with you. Remember our nations, remember who we were and how we lived. Keep our things. They are all that's left.

I have been thinking. There has been so much time to think. It has been easy for me to go back, to the days before all this began. When my Ethiopia was one of safety and love. When I would lie down in the back seat of my mother's car as she drove and listen to her voice rising and falling to a fable of her own devising. My mother taught through tales, her ideas of right and wrong, lessons gleaned through hard experience, bequeathing cultural and historical inheritances, her hopes for what I could one day become – all essential truths layered like secreted gold beneath the wax overlay of her innocuous tales. She was preparing me. Telling me everything I would ever need to know. Telling me what had been told her. Enduring lessons. Essential truths. This is what stories are.

After the split, I walked from Addis with a suitcase on one arm and my mother on the other. In the last days I had to carry her. Her body was slight. The grand fiery woman she had been had diminished in cadence to the fading of our hopes. I carried her and felt that I had gone full circle. I was mother to her then.

I am grateful to have been the last face she saw, grateful for every bruise and cut on my body that meant I had sheltered hers, for every gasp of weariness that escaped me and spared her the same. To be there for her as she had been for me.

But there is another who has mothered me, and my own mother besides, back over generations, through the ages and back to that very beginning which is also our end. This country. My country. It grew around my absence and awaited my return. I am glad to have spent these days in the land of my birth, amongst friends. All those years I was away, I couldn't have dreamed of how deeply my

soul would ingrain itself back into the daily rhythms of life here. In many ways these have been the happiest days of my life. My Ethiopia.

For all that came before and all that may come still. For my mother. For myself. For this land with these people and these stories and this beating heart that will never cease. How can I do otherwise?

I will never stop. I will never surrender and I will always remember the truths I have been told.

John, I know what's out there and I know why. I understand how this battle must be fought.

I am glad to have known you in these final days, to have watched you grow beyond the limits of your past. But now you need to wake up.

Zenebech

i	Simwa Tesema translates as: Her name Was heard
ii	Inat Negatch: the Mother Awakens
iii	'House of the Saviour of the World'. One of the eleven monolithic rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia.
iv	Pankurst, Alula. <i>Alula Abanega</i> . https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_h7IQBNl8Gw
v	Berber: a blend of chilli spices
vi	Seuss, Dr. "Theodor Seuss Geisel." <i>How the Grinch Stole Christmas</i> (1954).
vii	The writing on this entry was badly water damaged, the little that was still legible has been transcribed
viii	Agelgil: an intricately crafted lunch box
ix	Injera: a soft flatbread made out of teff flour
x	Ethiopian alphabet
xi	Kocho: a flatbread made from the fermented starch of the Enset (false banana) plant
xii	Tej: honey wine
xiii	Gursha: meaning 'mouthful', feeding another/being fed by another by hand
xiv	Niter Qibay: Ethiopian purified and spiced butter
xv	Mitmita: Red chilli powder
xvi	Erd: Turmeric
xvii	Ge'ez: liturgical language of the Ethiopian church
xviii	Frost, Robert. <i>Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1939</i> . Halycon House, 1939. Excerpt from: <i>My November Guest</i>
xix	Ketema: tall green grass
xx	Ariti: Artemisia Afra
xxi	Tej sar: lemon grass
xxii	Etan: Incense resin
xxiii	Jebena: a ceramic pot used to brew coffee
xxiv	Wot: a stew (general)
xxv	Tella: home-brewed beer
xxvi	Buna: coffee
xxvii	Difo dabo: home baked bread
xxviii	Abebayehosh. Lemlem: a song little girls sing during Enkutatash or New Year
xxix	Inquan l'addis amet abro aderesen: Thank God we have arrived safely into the new year together (: = . in Amharic)
xxx	Tenadam: Ruta chalepensis
xxxi	Negussie translates as: my king
xxxii	Gabi: luxurious handwoven blanket
xxxiii	Gebeta: a type of mancala board-game consisting of the 'count and capture' of seeds
xxxiv	Gibbon, Edward. <i>The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i> . Vol. 6. Murray, 1848, p.81
xxxv	Besma'am: a word used to express strong emotion, ranging from horror to excitement.

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To the Flames

I peek through the doorway and there you are.

Seated upon your throne in that place between worlds, in that realm of containment and chaos, where all things collide. Your eyes black with eternity, the dots tattooed across your hand projecting galaxies into the heavens, the scales of your heart weighted to perfect balance. This you that exists before, beyond and without me is colossal in scale, formidable to behold. This is the will that flattens planets and ignites existence, that demands complete devotion and utter destruction. The alpha and the omega. The void at the centre of the whirlpool, where truth is greatest and love abounds. There is room in that place for me, you have cleared a space and speared me with your all-seeing gaze. You are infinite, I can nestle in your arms or crest far away upon your waves. I am all-consuming, you can rest easy within my walls of flame or dance upon the smouldering edges of our union. Our borders meld and bleed and stray with time, but our horizons are held steady in your line of sight.

You and I, our country and our worlds.

The promise of our future together unfurls in the gentle creases of your deep-set eyes. The times we will share, the moments that we will craft – for just an instant the book is open to me and I see all the pages at once. Solid black, bristling with our history. The waiting rooms of our travels will pass with your hand in mine. You will spin me tales and weave me into your tapestry while I lie on furs and watch the world pass me by. Your childhood, my future, what the world will become. This you see and more besides. For it was always written. And in your hand. That wild, cramped and disordered script. That writing that is not like the rest of you. A wily soul may know it for what it is. A peek behind the embroidered velvet capes, brilliant technicolour jewels, and shimmering interchangeable faces of your dazzling joker's masquerade. A glimpse of your metal underlay. Of symbols steeped and singed, cast in fire and flood.

You are gold without and gold within.

You know your own worth, weighed in metric tons and bullion bricks. It is there in the slant of your broad shoulders, the tilt of your pencilled brow. You know your own worth and you will know mine, even when I do not. Your voice, that masculine depth, the words that tumble from your lips, breadcrumbs to guide me through my dreaming. You cast out your symbols and the letters danced through the ether. They plastered themselves in my heart and stained my soul with meaning. ምኞ፡ኑ።

You have called to me and I must answer. You have called to me and I have come. We are one, you and I. Born of the same word, conjured by the same will. The keys that jangle on your hip, part the gates to infinity.

You who hold back the tides and bear the flame.

You are the rock I will build myself upon. My mountains will whisper with your wisdom. I will rise like a colossus from the avalanche of your advance. My oceans will surge and recoil to the beating of your heart. I will paint my skies with the words you gave me, and lie upon scented grass to watch your stories play themselves out among the clouds. But not quite yet. Those stills flicker upon the reels of our fantasies. Yes, one day I will be worthy of you. One day, I may even surpass you. But for now, let it suffice to say that I would crumble to dust without you. The same time that propelled others forward has shattered me into a thousand pieces, scattered me to a thousand worlds. Every moment undoes me, until only you remain. You to seek me out, gather me up, and make me whole again. You are lapping me this way and that, surging me upon your waves, raising me towards your throne in that dreamscape tucked away in time's creased pockets.

Have all the words been claimed?

Are there no new ones I may conjure to sculpt the landscapes of my adoration? I choose you. I have ceased my dreaming. My eyes are wide open. I see all there is to see and more besides. I see you.

To the Waves

ሴት፡ልድ፡መወለድ፡እናትን፡መወለድ፡ነወ።

SEIT LIJ MEHWLED INATIN MEHWLED NEW.

To deliver a daughter is to give birth to one's own mother.

I close my eyes to dream and there you are.

Winging to me upon crisp folded sheets of paper, hurtling up from out of the void, clinging to the edges of my hopes. My will personified. You are stronger than you know, and why not? Have I not raised you upon my shoulders? Lifted you onto my knee? Made you first in my heart? And here you are now, standing sentinel at my side. Guard at my gate. Closing the circle of our interlaced destinies. ወርቅነሽ። Eighteen carats, tinged with the crimson of our mingled blood. Your heart has grown beyond me in your travels, as well it should, but your soul... it radiates with sadness. There is a weakness blossoming within you, congealing in your veins, grinding your forward surge to a halt. It has frozen you in stasis, clipped your wings and clapped you in irons. Are you surprised that your secrets are laid bare before me? You must remember that my eyes can pierce the illusions you cast, that my ears can sieve the truth from your lies. Remember that I know all your forms, I speak all your tongues. I know your games of shadow and light, of sleep and wakefulness.

I will help you unravel your mysteries.

And I will translate your secrets into a language you can understand. Once, you lay back on furs to follow the dance of my words. Your mind may have been too young to fathom the significance of my tales, but your heart already knew... I am the one who holds aloft the flaring match, the one from whom your nightmares flee. And you are the one who roars to life within me and imbues me with a warrior's valour. Reflecting back at me from your mirror realm, shadowing me and more besides. We stand back to back, so you may be forgiven for forgetting that I am always near, doubling your strength with my love. You feel alone and eternity is vast, but I hold the keys to the doors that divide us, to the realms that you must traverse. I will part the veil, translate the plot, reveal the truth beneath the gloss. Heroes and villains, good and evil, right and wrong. These were only characters in my play, bold shapes for a child to follow. I knew that time and experience would texture your reality with innumerable shades of grey. And so they have and here you are. The physical embodiment of my wishing. Limping home, streaked with silver and wounded within.

You are not as I left you.

You have disappeared into the fold between my page and yours, blurred yourself into layers that you can shed and store away, divided yourself into insignificance. You have flung yourself, wholeheartedly, into the depths of life's complexities and splattered the walls with the shreds of

your humanity. It is sometimes a pleasure to observe you navigating life's peaks and troughs but too often you are a reckless captain. The siren song of humanity's sorrows lures you continually towards the jagged rocks of despair. Everything affects you, the universe in its entirety seeps unheeded into your being, drowning you in its troubles. In through your heart, out through your eyes. You must stem this tide, clot this outward flow. Draw strength from the earth beneath your feet, the blood in your veins, the tales in your heart. Claim your place, open your heart, know your worth, seek your happiness. You will never be alone in your quest. You need only turn around, and there I shall be.

Ready to make you whole again.

I will gather your limbs, reassemble your heart, reconstitute your being. I will ensconce you in the riches that sustained you, the scents and sights, tastes and tales of our collective youth. And you – you will rise again. Infused with the history of the earth from which your roots sprang. Me but a million times over. Multiplied, amplified, enriched and expanded upon. Your branches having unfurled beyond the borders of your birth and flowered, pleasantly, in foreign climes. Filled to overflowing with tales I could never have dreamed of. Stories you've gathered in your travels, that cling to your heart and ornament it forever. These tales, bearing the scents of far-off lands, the weight of another culture's accoutrement, are new and marvellous to me. And you tell them so well.

To the Earth

አርበኛ

ARBEGNA

Patriot

I was.

The thought conceived and the word uttered. The soil beneath your feet, resplendent with your roots. The empty throne. The already cluttered tome, thickened by time and weighted with wisdom. Sheets infused with the essence of a million lifetimes, worn thin by a millennia of scribing hands.

I am.

And your histories unfurl across my pages, call to me across the void, awaken me from my fitful dreaming. You are and so I am written. Redeemed. Born anew and teeming with your tomorrows.

I will be.

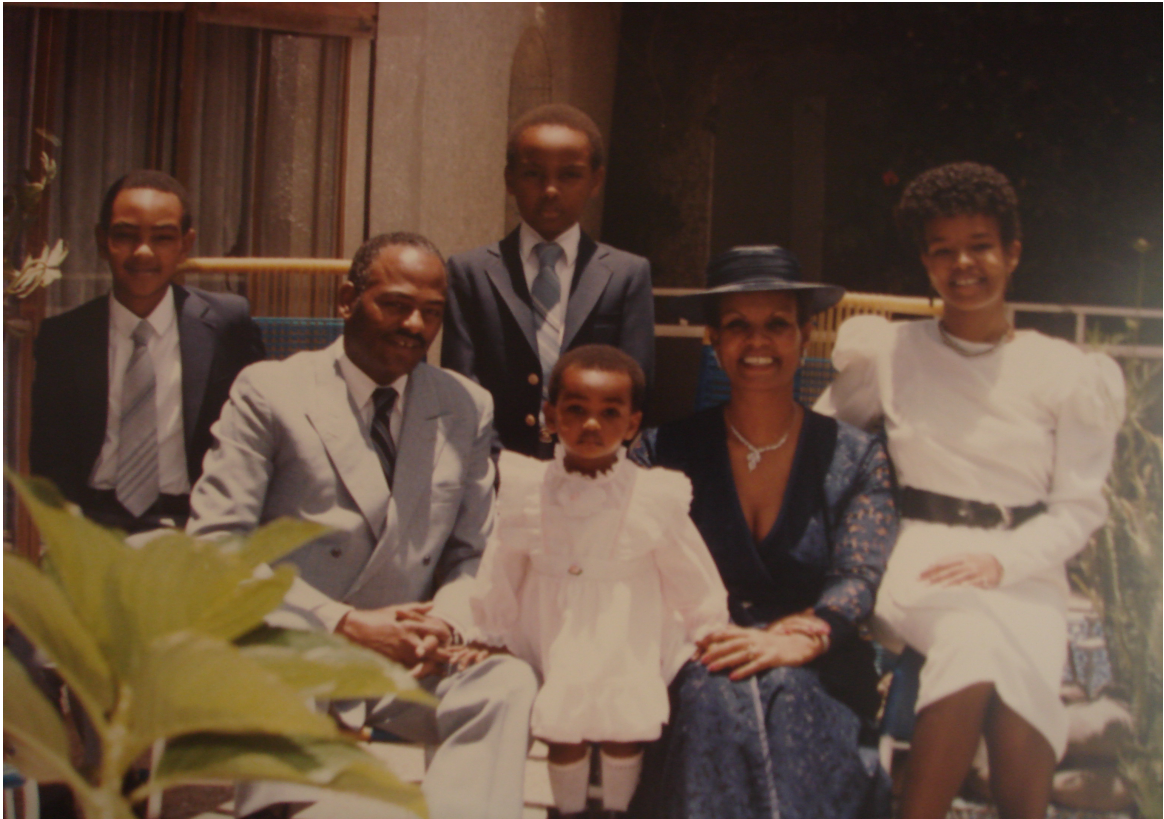
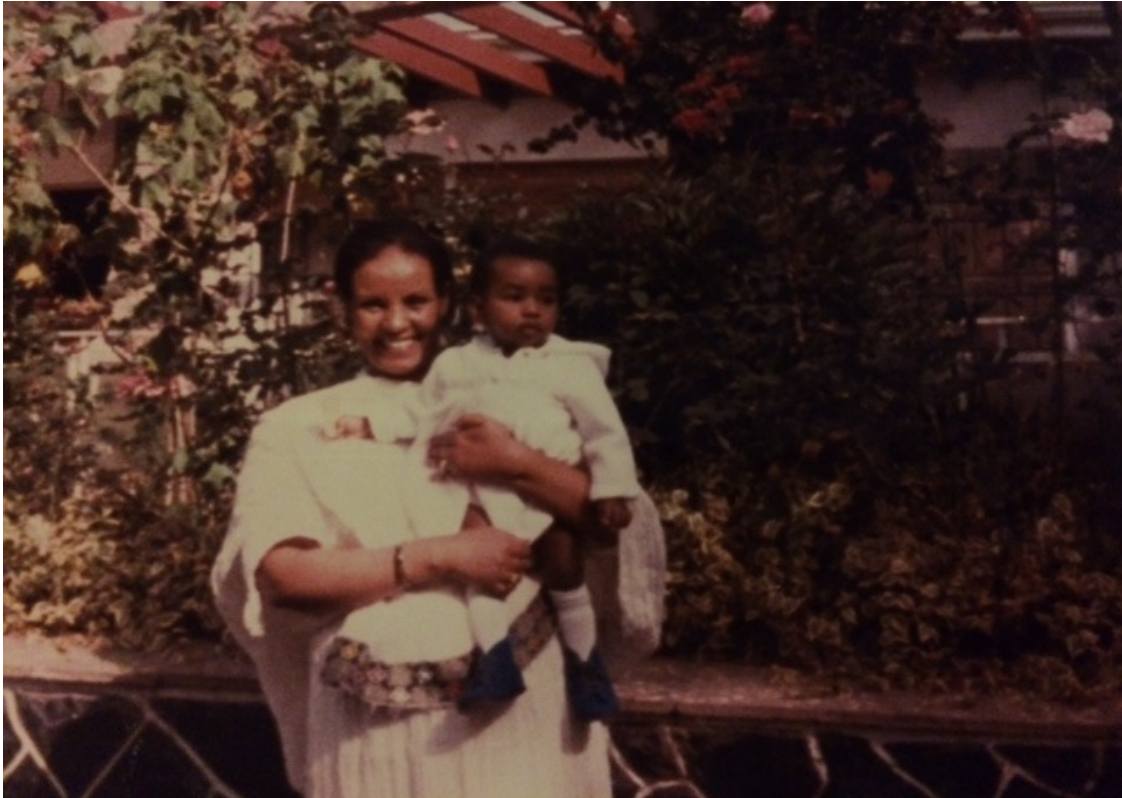
When all is dust and only your words remain. I shall read you to infinity and call you forth again.













Statement of Poetics

Personal History...

This thesis was born from a very personal journey – my own. It is research rooted in and sprung from my personal history and reflects my search for identity in a life characterised by movement. Three rivers feed into this story. They are: my country, my mother, my self. That is to say: Ethiopia, Workinesh Shalemu, Mignotte Mekuria; respectively. A decade before my birth a bloody coup overthrew the monarchy that had ruled Ethiopia for centuries, replacing the government of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings, Elect of God with that of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Derg Regime – a period of Ethiopian history that would come to be known as The Red Terror.

I was born in 1984, the same year in which my country shot to dubious international fame as the result of a much publicised famine. Growing up in my affluent little suburb in Addis Ababa, ensconced in the gilded trappings of my parents' hard-earned privilege, I had no idea that I was living under the iron fist of a violent despot. No idea that my country's reputation was collapsing on the fickle stock-markets of public opinion. Everyday life swirled past in a delightful cocoon of horse-riding lessons, raucous playtime with friends at school, and hours spent in conversation and debate with my parents'. I was the fourth and last child, and my parents were careful to shelter me from the daily dangers that threatened their property and sometimes their lives, from the particular struggles they faced as successful business owners under a repressive communist regime. But the political invariably bleeds into the personal and in the end no-one was spared the painful backlash of our national strife. When I was three years old, my sister and two brothers (then in their teens), were sent abroad to study at a boarding school in the United States of America. I remained with my parents in Ethiopia for half the year, then went with them to visit my siblings in the U.S. for the other half. I grew up spending half my school year in each country and learning to shape-shift regularly between the two disparate cultures.

My life took on a dualistic nature. In Ethiopia, I attended the international school where my friends hailed from all over the world. I grew up surrounded by numerous cultures and ways of being, and soon realised that nothing privileged my customs, that my ways were only one of many – neither better nor worse intrinsically. I learned about the glories of Ethiopian history, of the ancient Kingdom of Axum, of the Queen of Sheba, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, the defeat of the Italians – during the 1886 Battle of Adwa and again during the Second World War – that left Ethiopia the only country to remain uncolonised in Africa. My country loomed larger than life,

ancient, complex, beautiful – it would inspire my stories even then. My parents and my family at large were a part of this history, inexorably intertwined with my country's fate. They had grown up in a very different reality to my own, in the golden age and dying days of one of the longest reigning monarchies the world had ever known. Their photos, overflowing from albums, and their memories, recast in story form, bore both the weight of a crumbling empire and their hopes for its future and mine. Both my parents were fundamental in the shaping of my sense of self but it was my mother who instilled my love of stories and creative writing. I recall her driving us from place to place in her white Toyota with the plush dalmatian print seat covers while I reclined in the back. She would tell me stories to pass the time. I knew even then that they were propaganda – the heroine always got her bachelor's degree before marrying the hero – but I loved them none-the-less. In many ways, I was raised on her tales – which she imbued with history, spiced with personal accounts and slathered with enough swashbuckling adventure to suit my adventurous nature. My mother sparked my love of stories and reading and did everything in her power to encourage it. And when I struggled to find the heroines I was looking for amongst our shelves, she gave me a notebook and told me to write my own stories. I would read them to her sometimes as she drove and Addis swept past us in a streak of colour and sound.

The other half of my school year was spent in the United States of America. I can clearly recall the crowded arrivals terminal at the airport, the embarrassingly loud customs staff, the invasive baggage searches, the grand exit that always made me feel too exposed, and the long freeway drive from LAX to our home in Orange County. I loved a great many things about my visits to California, the greatest of which was getting to spend time with my siblings, but I struggled to make friends and fit in at school. I had already met Americans in my school in Ethiopia, was used to their culture, but in my elementary school in the U.S. I was the only foreigner, and found myself an object of curiosity and shockingly, disdain. As an Ethiopian, race had never been an issue for me, but suddenly, as a 'resident alien' in the U.S. I was redefined, relabelled and renamed. I was now black – a word I learned was heavily weighted with a wealth of unsavoury connotations. I was an immigrant from a vaguely conceived underdeveloped state, somewhere between a depressing soup kitchen and a glorified animal reserve. There was a sense of a gentle reminder hanging in the air, like a quietly cleared throat, the idea that I should be grateful for the sanctuary I had been granted in a first world nation. The fact that my family was well to do, that my parents were successful entrepreneurs, that I went to a private school, had horse riding lessons, that my country was ancient, that my culture was complex and rich and varied meant nothing. And being told who you are, time and time again, and having your objections and assertions fall on deaf ears is an unpleasant, unsettling and insidiously affecting experience. I existed in an in-between place, caught in the push

and pull between what I knew myself to be and what others insisted I was. I fought to be true to myself, even as questions of who I was exactly, surfaced to challenge me.

By the time I started high school, I was living in the U.S. full-time with my siblings (my parents remained in Ethiopia to run the family business and provide us with support) and learning how to negotiate the many cultural hurdles and pitfalls of being a foreigner. The friends I made, and kept, were other 'strangers' like me. Second generation Americans, fresh arrivals, foreign exchange students – we clumped together, finding commonalities in our united differences. We spun webs between our cultures, highlighting the little things that united us, the countless things that set us apart from everyone else. We told each other stories about our home countries in the safe places of our exile, swapping tales and sympathy in cafés and shopping malls, weaving together a myriad of realities from each other's scraps to form a patchwork identity of our own.

Today, I am still a 'stranger' struggling with her identity in a foreign land, living far from my home and my mother who continues to work in Addis, eagerly awaiting my return. We talk every week, spending hours on Skype and Viber, swapping gossip and crafting tales – little has changed in that sense from my childhood. My mother continues to ground me in truth with her expertly crafted tales, she is my link to Ethiopia and my place-holder in the complex mosaic of Addis Ababa's society and yet we have lived apart for over a decade. My mother, my country, and the stories that I write form the foundations of my identity and are therefore essential in investigating my personal experiences of being an exiled daughter.

...Creative Context

My primary interest is the link between storytelling and memory in crafting the identities of exiled daughters, and I investigate this further through research into the connection between a mother's narrative and a daughter's nostalgia. By its very nature, my thesis requires that I challenge the prevailing norm within society, and particularly, academic traditions of privileging 'formal' political and religious documents over diaries and personal memoirs, of over-relying on binary oppositions ('truth'/'lies', 'fiction'/'non-fiction'), and singular notions of identity. My work dehierarchizes concepts of knowing and belonging by recasting personal documents as valid historical artefacts, melding 'oppositions' into these complementary discourses and positing multiple and fluid notions of identity and 'otherness'.

The interplay between creative and critical, personal and global, underpins the theoretical and historical context of my work and the poetics that have been developed in its production, articulating insights gained into the nature of self-fashioning, the purpose of the ficto-

autobiographical novel, and its complex relationship with the author's life history. The complementary discourses conclude by offering responses to questions about the interactions between gender, identity and creative processes, before proposing future lines of enquiry into the nature of identity and the possibilities of the novel to unearth it. It is important to me that the novellas and the critical research both receive due consideration, and that they read holistically as opposed to being regarded as two very separate works. The creative works form the very building blocks of this thesis, they served as a catalyst for my exile's journey and a vehicle through which I could enact my own self-examination within a societal framework without risking overexposure or censure. The structure and composition of this work reflects the cyclic experience of being an exile and stresses the in-between spaces that complicate and give nuance to our understanding of ourselves, one another and the world we live in. This thesis, while rooted in the deeply personal and autobiographical, is grounded firmly in a global context. It is my assertion that I am not alone in my exile's journey, that there are millions of others out there like me who have felt 'othered', who stand as strangers outside the borders and confines of 'traditional notions' of identity. To better understand and accommodate the full complexity of our humanity, it is essential that we investigate all our ways of knowing and being – the stories we share, the relationships we keep, the places we inhabit, the lives we pass – and to resist the temptation to oversimplify, de-mystify, pigeon-hole, or set in stone.

Bricolage as a form of intellectual enquiry speaks to the complex and intertextual nature of my research and creative works. Its purposeful complication and dehierarchizing of traditional narrative forms reflects its rigorous nature as a style of inquiry. As Matt Rogers defines it:

The theories that underlie bricolage make it far more complex than a simple eclectic approach. The etymological foundation of bricolage comes from a traditional French expression which denotes crafts-people who creatively use materials left over from other projects to construct new artefacts. To fashion their bricolage projects, bricoleurs use only the tools and materials 'at-hand' (Levi-Strauss, 1966). This mode of construction is in direct contrast to the work of engineers, who follow set procedures and have a list of specific tools to carry out their work. Further, it signifies approaches that examine phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing, theoretical and methodological perspectives.¹

¹ Rogers, Matt. "Contextualizing theories and practices of bricolage research." *The qualitative report* 17.48 (2012): 1-17.

As bricolage and the idea of play are at the heart of my thesis, it is inescapable that it should bleed through into my writing, both critical and creative. My trilogy of creative works, *Sem Inna Werq*, is from its title page a nod to my personal history and an homage to multiplicity and layering. It is also an introduction to the many realities my mother inhabits and the many forms she embodies in my tales – my mother's name ወርቅነሽ (Workinesh) means 'you are gold'. *Sem inna werq*, meanwhile, is the phonetic rendering of ሰም:እና:ወርቅ which translates from the Amharic as 'wax and gold' – a formula used to symbolize a form of classical Ethiopian verse, as Levine summarises:

[*Sem inna werq*] is a form built of two semantic layers. The apparent, figurative meaning of the words is called “wax”; their more or less hidden actual significance is the “gold.” In its generic sense, the expression...refers to a number of poetic figures which embody this twofold meaning. It consists of an explicit comparison in which the subjects being compared – the wax and gold – are presented in apposition, while their predicates are rendered jointly by a single verb which carries both a wax and a gold meaning. (This terminology is derived from the work of the goldsmith, who constructs a clay mould around a form created in wax and then, draining the wax, pours the molten gold into the form.)²

Folie À Plusieurs, as the first of my three novellas and as the beginning of the exile's journey, exemplifies this multi-layered cultural underpinning and emerges as a patchwork quilt of reconstituted tales and rescued memories. As exile, author and bricoleur I assembled the tale from the materials available to me – from the flickering sparks of my own memories, the tattered cobwebs of half-remembered tales lovingly gathered in my travels, the succulent scents and tastes of the recipes from my Rolodex of global myth and lore. The novella consciously engages with numerous differing cultures and plays with aspects of their mythology, exploiting the tensions between viewing something from within as opposed to observing it from without, between what is real and imagined – the fade and flare of memory, the meld and flow of biography and fairytale. The tales themselves ripple out in circles and are drawn back into the heart of the whirlpool, mirroring the central nature of exile and self-discovery. In this way, *Folie À Plusieurs* is able to shimmer between truth and fiction, biography and history and to express the multiplicity at the heart of an individual's, especially an exile's, sense of identity. It layers perspectives, stories, ways of being and notions of reality to dress the stage for the dismantling of binary-oppositional thinking

² Levine, Donald Nathan. *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian culture*. Vol. 11. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

with the onset of the *Queens of Meroë* – a tale in which everything becomes bricolage. The second novella is a bubbling cauldron upon a roaring flame, wherein myth, legend, memory and history combine, conflagrate and coalesce. This method of play unbalances traditional notions of good and evil and institutes instead a layering of the many-fold experiences of humanity in a bid to add nuance to our understanding and examining of who we are as well as of the stories that made us that way. *አርባኛ* unravels out of the *Queens of Meroë* as an ode to multiplicity, layering alphabets and desynchronising time. *አርባኛ* is a tale told in three voices – each traced over the blank spaces of the one before, allowing me as an individual to tap into the pulse of experiences beyond mine: Experiences that are global, that transcend me and my personal history and speak to a greater sensation of exile that can be shared and which lends itself particularly well to expression within a creative context.

It is my firm belief that the 'practice as research' method, where the theory is imbricated within the practice, was instrumental to the investigation and realisation of my thesis. The methodology, with its inter-disciplinary and intertextual underpinnings, allowed me to fully exploit the potential of creative work to both enact my exile's journey and to cast my personal history in a light that could be globally applicable. Robin Nelson described the practice as research method as coming out of poststructuralism's fostering of

a sceptical and radical mode of thought which resonates with experimentation in arts practices insofar as play is a method of inquiry, aiming not to establish findings by way of data to support a demonstrable and finite answer to a research question, but to put in play elements in a bricolage which afford insights through deliberate and careful juxtaposition. The process...is rigorous in working through, and selecting material for presentation, but it is a rigour functioning in a different conceptual framework from that of logical argument based in reason as traditionally perceived. Its aim is to discover 'what works' or what invites critical insights through a dialogic engagement, rather than what is true adjudged by the criteria of scientific rationalism.³

The structure of my thesis evolved from and through the crafting of my creative works, but it was a process that required a great deal of experimentation – not all of which was successful. In the course of my research, and especially during my four month field-trip to Ethiopia, I have gathered a wealth of information: countless books and articles on everything from Negritude (upon which my initial

³ Nelson, Robin. "Practice-as-research and the problem of knowledge." *Performance Research* 11.4 (2006): 105-116.

proposal hinged) to French feminism and beyond, over sixteen gigabytes of photos and sound recordings – both ambient sounds and extensive interviews with my mother – four lyrical essays (one written before my field-trip, two during, and the fourth upon my return to the UK), and five conference papers⁴ that I presented in five different countries. I have consciously sifted through all that material and sieved it through the dream-catcher of my creative works in order to build this thesis – some of the material appears in its original form, some of it is barely recognizable in its final rendering for all the transformations it has undergone, some things appear as folds and gaps that hint at what is concealed or missing, that accentuate the deafening silences of otherness. The transcripts of my interviews with my mother are perhaps the most noticeable for their absence, a conscious decision on my part that I will discuss at more length below. It is a process that requires care, thought and a great deal of experimentation that I believe benefits from the artistic and personal nature of my project.

The practice as research model is, in a sense, reminiscent of the more classical method of education, where the arts served as an extension of and fountain-head for other fields which included the physical sciences. It is, therefore a melding of past and present, just as much as it is a melding of idea and realised object.

In the arts, practice as research involves artist-researchers exploring, testing and extending a diverse range of creative methodologies and working across diverse contexts – exploring the relationship of creative interventions to both making and understanding the world.⁵

My creative works serve as the axis around which this research hinges and revolves. I believe that my thesis exemplifies the unique benefits of engaging with creative practice-based research, and that the conclusions I derive would have been impossible to reach without it. The Sem Inna Werq Trilogy has had a profound effect on the unfolding of my personal exile's journey and my understanding of how my experiences travel and translate beyond my singular existence. It has led me down some unexpected twists and turns, challenged my initial critical assertions and helped to reshape and refine both my research questions and conclusions. From the submission of my initial

⁴ Switzerland, Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literature, History and the Demise of Empires (*Rewriting English*)/ United Kingdom, SPARC Conference (*Where Theory and Practice Meet: A Reading*)/ Slovakia, Literature and Humanity in the 21st Century (*Defining Oneself by Otherness: Autoethnography and the Exile Imaginaries of Humanity in Flux*)/ Greece, Shapeshifters - Transformations, Hybridity, and Identity (*Neither Here Nor There: Global Shapeshifters, Multiple Identities, and Imagined Realities*)/ Poland, Revolting Peripheries (*Centering the Self; Centering the Periphery: Autoethnography and the Necessary Complexities of Defining Oneself by Otherness*).

⁵ Sjoberg, Johannes and Jenny Hughes. 'Practice as Research', Frankfort-Nachmias, Chava, and David Nachmias. *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. Macmillan, 2007.

PhD proposal to this final draft, my theories of what it means to be other and my ideas of how the exile's journey would unfold, have undergone a fundamental shift and it is the creative pieces that have been at the heart of this evolution in my thinking and understanding. Estelle Barrett further defines the nature and necessity of the 'practice as research' methodology:

practice led research is a new species of research generative enquiry that draws on subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies that have the potential to expand the frontiers of research... [whose value may be gauged in answer to the question] What new knowledge/understanding did the studio enquiry and methodology generate that may not have been revealed through other research approaches?⁶

In my personal experience, the creative pieces were not only fundamental to the shaping of my thesis but they also served as buffers between me and society – fluttering veils that blurred my edges and rendered my features indistinct – effectively shielding me from overexposure and allowing me to be more honest about my experiences without fear of judgement. The autobiographical nature of my line of enquiry requires that I share a great deal about my life as well as the lives of those closest to me and the temptation to edit my experiences or to show myself in the best possible light would have been overpowering had I not been able to imbue my work with creative play. In this sense, creative play and fiction provided me with the means necessary to access deeper truths – about myself and society at large.

The practice as research methodology also provides an opportunity to engage with stories and storytelling (both within a written text and in an oral context) within a research framework, engaging with the idea that

[stories] aren't souvenir tee-shirts or GameBoys. Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible. Sometimes the fossil you uncover is small; a seashell. Sometimes it's enormous, a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* with all those gigantic ribs and grinning teeth.⁷

There is a sense of magic in stories, a sleight of hand that puzzles and enchants at once. Like pulling

⁶ Barrett, Estelle. 'Introduction' in *Practice As Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2010), 1.

⁷ King, Stephen. *On Writing*. Hachette UK, 2001. (188-189)

on the handkerchief hanging from a magician's sleeve, only to find it knotted to another, and another, and so on and on, in a never ending chain, to infinity until all the world lies in a pool of silk and still the knots appear. Returning to my own stories over the course of my study, and seeking out the tales of my mother, I have realised ultimately that the world in its entirety is merely a tale being written and that stories are, in a sense, the atoms of our humanity and the building blocks of our consciousness. As a society, we exist by stories and, in fact, much of what we wrongly privilege as historical fact is merely one perspective (usually the dominant one) in millions, one tale repeated until it is believed.

In the words of Aldous Huxley: “all Gods are homemade, and it is we who pull their strings, and so, give them the power to pull ours”⁸ and in this way centering the story has had a profound effect on how I see the world, my understanding of how I am perceived within it, and how I choose to reveal myself and to whom. I have also realised that what I have unearthed so far only hints at the worlds just beyond my digging fingers, that even my stories have not been fully revealed to me yet. In fact, this thesis has emerged as the first step in what I believe will be a lifelong mission to further uncover the stories that have imbued my life with meaning and in doing so, to understand the stories that we as a global society live by.

There is, perhaps, nothing more fundamental than the personal story, the grain of sand on the beach of world history. A story signals a beginning, so it is fitting that my thesis begins with stories, namely the stories my mother told me, the stories that helped define who I am and the ones that still call my identity into question. My stories ripple far beyond the confines of my personal experience, they defy borders, spill across oceans and, as Christine Brooke-Rose describes, map out the rise and fall of nations and the span of centuries:

There are more stars in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy... There are more stories in heaven and earth, Horatio... For ‘story’ has now become a star word in critical theory, for the representation of ‘things’: history, criticism, chemistry, physics, sociology, psychoanalysis or philosophy, are all stories we tell ourselves to understand the world, all quite meta (-phorical, -linguistic, -historical, if there is a meta-), the Matter of Britain, of France, of the World, of Me.⁹

Spotlighting 'the story' serves to immediately complicate an issue, to add depth that demands

⁸ Huxley, Aldous. *Island*. Random House, 2005.

⁹ Brooke-Rose, Christine. *Stories, theories and things*. Cambridge University Press, 1991 (p5).

understanding. Stories have the power to overcome the distances between people and to undo the hierarchies that keep them apart and unsympathetic to one another. Regardless of social status, wealth, race, gender or religion, each person carries with them a treasure trove of stories – the profound moments and the mundane, the tragic and the blissful – that are relatable to others in a way that is intensely human. Stories humanise a subject, inject multiplicity and encourage a feeling of sympathy between individuals. In a sense, our world is made of stories, it runs on stories (like a steam engine on coal), and falls by them too.

The first stories I knew of myself and the world came from the lips of my mother. She told me them to keep me quiet on long drives, or to help me drift off to sleep at bedtime. During our interviews together, my mother told me that initially she had tried to sing me to sleep, but while that had worked with all three of my older siblings, it had the unfortunate effect of making me cry and so it was in desperation that she turned to words to lull me to sleep. I understand now that she carefully crafted each of her stories to encourage me, to build me up, to make me strong – like a daily dose of essential vitamins to prepare me spiritually for the world she knew awaited me. My mother taught me how to be brave, how to insist upon myself and take a stand, she raised me upon the shoulders of others like me and built herself into the foundations of my pedestal. She prepared me for a world that would dare to challenge my definitions of myself, that would seek to brand me with its own labels, without ever revealing how harsh and cruel society's judgement could be. My mother navigated a tightrope with every tale she told – caught between the necessity of preparing me for life as an adult and the desire to shelter me for as long as possible from life's difficulties – and yet, somehow, with delicate silences and meaningful pauses, she managed to strike a balance that suited us both.

I am not alone in following my mother/Sherpa on a journey of stories. As Obioma Nnaemeka puts it:

African women writers have often acknowledged their indebtedness to “mothers” who were great story-tellers [...] The centrality of women in African oral tradition cannot be disputed [...] African women writers claim to be descendants of great female story-tellers in the oral tradition (in which strong, radical women and symbols of womanhood are visibly recognized)...¹⁰

My mother told me her stories, while I write mine – but I am aware that something is lost in-

¹⁰ Nnaemeka, Obioma. “From Orality to Writing: African women writers and the (re)inscription of womanhood.” *Research in African Literatures* 25.4 (1994): 137-157

between, something I hope to reclaim by finding myself. The gap between my mother's telling and my writing echoes the many other silences between us, silences that sound also in my own consciousness. My mother's storytelling has always felt more powerful than my writing. It is interesting that neither of us is capable of the other's talent. Her words can be heard behind mine, a distant echo, just as

[earlier] than written language, there was the anecdote, the brief telling of an adventure on the hunt, a narrow escape, or a piece of good fortune.¹¹

Sem Inna Werq is written, but all throughout I have mirrored the storytelling patterns that I have encountered in my own conversations. *Folie À Plusieurs*, especially, maps the circular and digressive nature of human thought patterns and interactions which can often veer off on tangents or stray from the marked path – a phenomenon that can be exploited creatively to gain insights into ourselves and one another by depoliticizing experience and generalising the personal.

Autoethnography, as a methodology, which in the words of Heewon Chang “transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation”¹² suits both the personal nature of my thesis and its relationship with stories and storytelling. As I am very aware of the individual basis of my thesis, I have utilised only my own personal experiences as an exiled daughter and 'stranger' to inform both my critical research and my novellas as case studies from which I can draw more widely-applicable insights into the processes of self-fashioning. This thesis lays me bare, my childhood, my memories, my relationships, my country, my culture, my struggles – they all imbue the work with a deep significance that is concentrated and generalised when passed through the filter of the creative process. In this way, by fictionalising my personal history, by puzzling through the symbols and symbolisms of my memories and dreams, I have been able to transcend my own experiences and to gain insight into a struggle for identity that affects so many others.

Growing up between Ethiopia and the United States of America, collecting friends from all corners of the globe, I had already begun to understand that the deeply personal could easily be shared, that experiences could be layered and commonalities stressed between very different peoples. All it took was the right story, or more to the point, the proper combination of stories (the discovery of which requires playful engagement and careful arrangement). My initial suppositions that my feelings of otherness – my struggles to locate myself in a world of multiplicity, to balance

¹¹ Stern, Jerome H., ed. *Micro fiction: an anthology of really short stories*. WW Norton & Company. 1996.

¹² Chang, Heewon. *Autoethnography as method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008.

the tensions between my mother's stories and those of society at large – were shared by countless others was vindicated through my dismantling, investigation and reconstruction of the stories I had been told.

The intersection between autoethnography and creative non-fiction allows me to find my truth, contribute to society's understanding of identity, call the current divide between creative and critical research into question, and unbalance hierarchical notions that privilege one over the other. Sem Inna Werq, and its statement of poetics, straddles a middle ground that resists and rejects attempts to pigeon-hole it with binary thinking or to oversimplify it by deleting the necessary complications of the personal and creative. As a work, it seeks to bridge the gap between the critical and creative, the personal and the global with

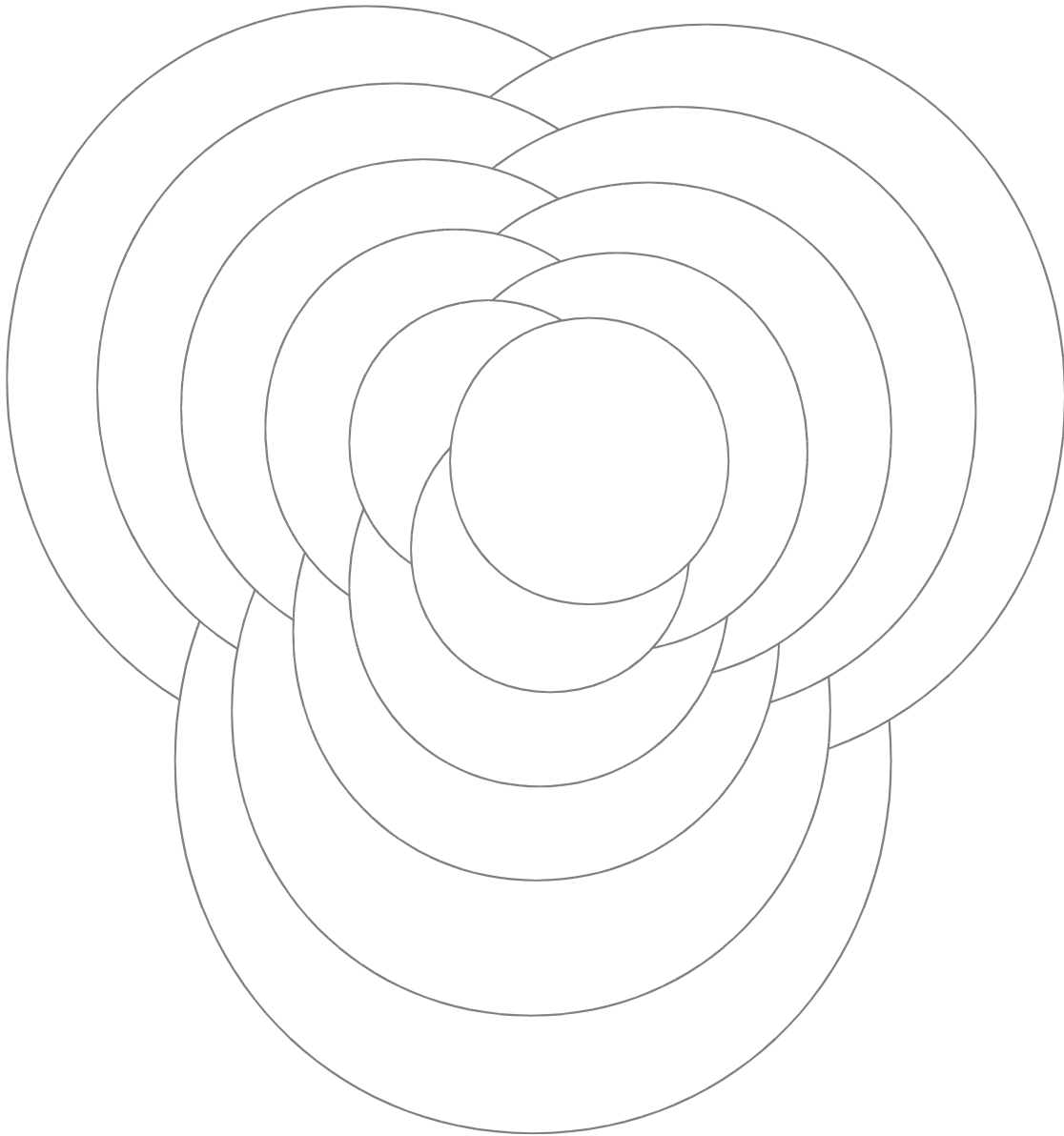
[an] artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one, [which] is forming. What are its key components?... Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture; plasticity of form, pointillism; criticism as autobiography; self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) any distinction between fiction and non-fiction: the lure and blur of the real.¹³

The 'lure and blur of the real' is exactly what I am attempting in the composite structure, by weaving the different interflowing strands together for example, of my novellas and my thesis in its entirety. This method of play is both a purposefully employed creative decision and a necessary result of the circular nature of the exile's journey, which takes on influences from everything in life. This circular journey is enacted both symbolically in the plot and literally in the framing and 'architecture' of the novellas.

The forms (see diagrams below) that grew out of the novellas speak to the self-reflective nature of this thesis as a whole. The figures that emerged form a blueprint for my stories and are a combination of the contrived and the unconscious, bridging the gaps between a sign and its symbol.

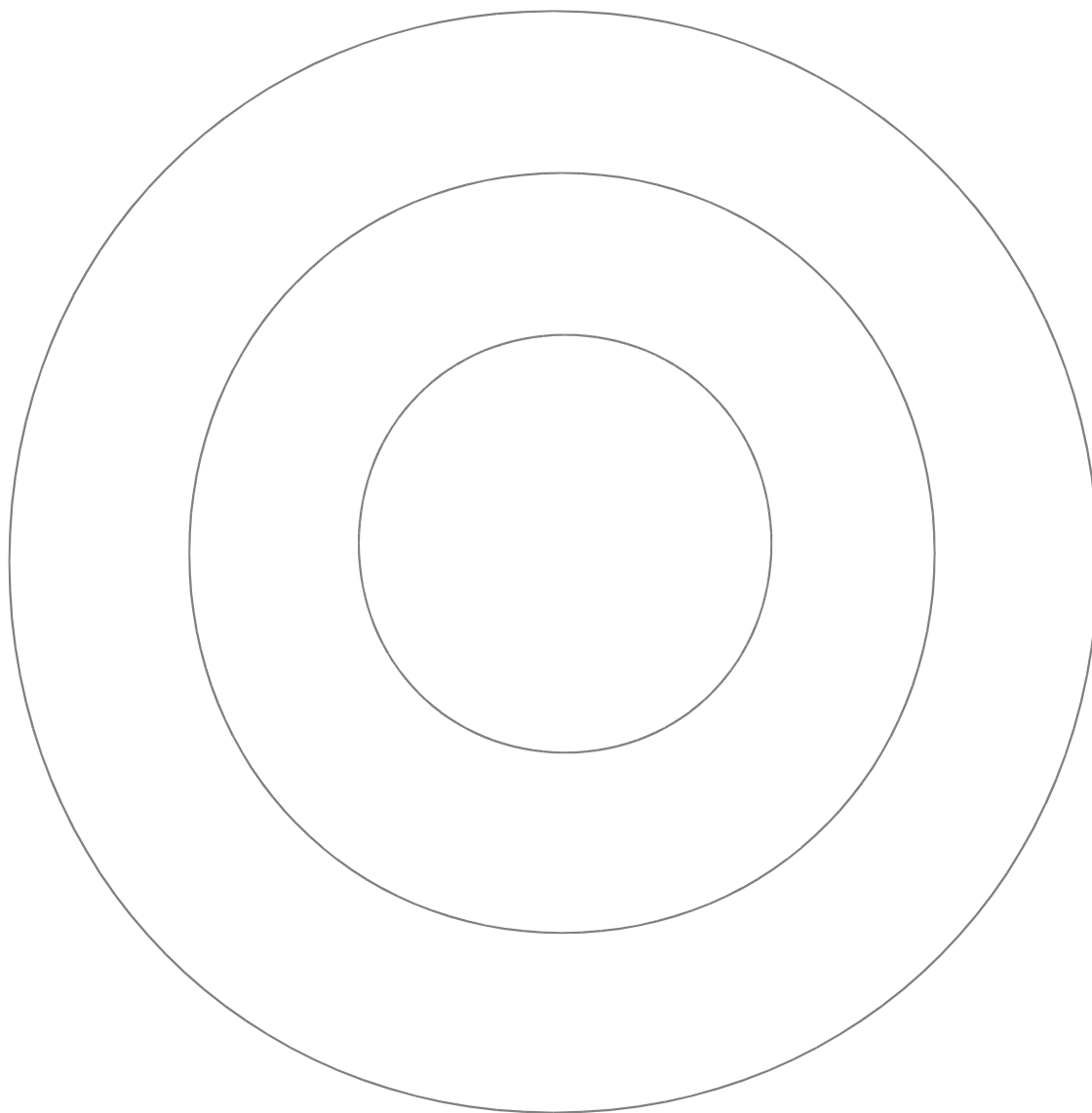
¹³ Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 5.

Figure 1: Sem Inna Werq – The Novellas



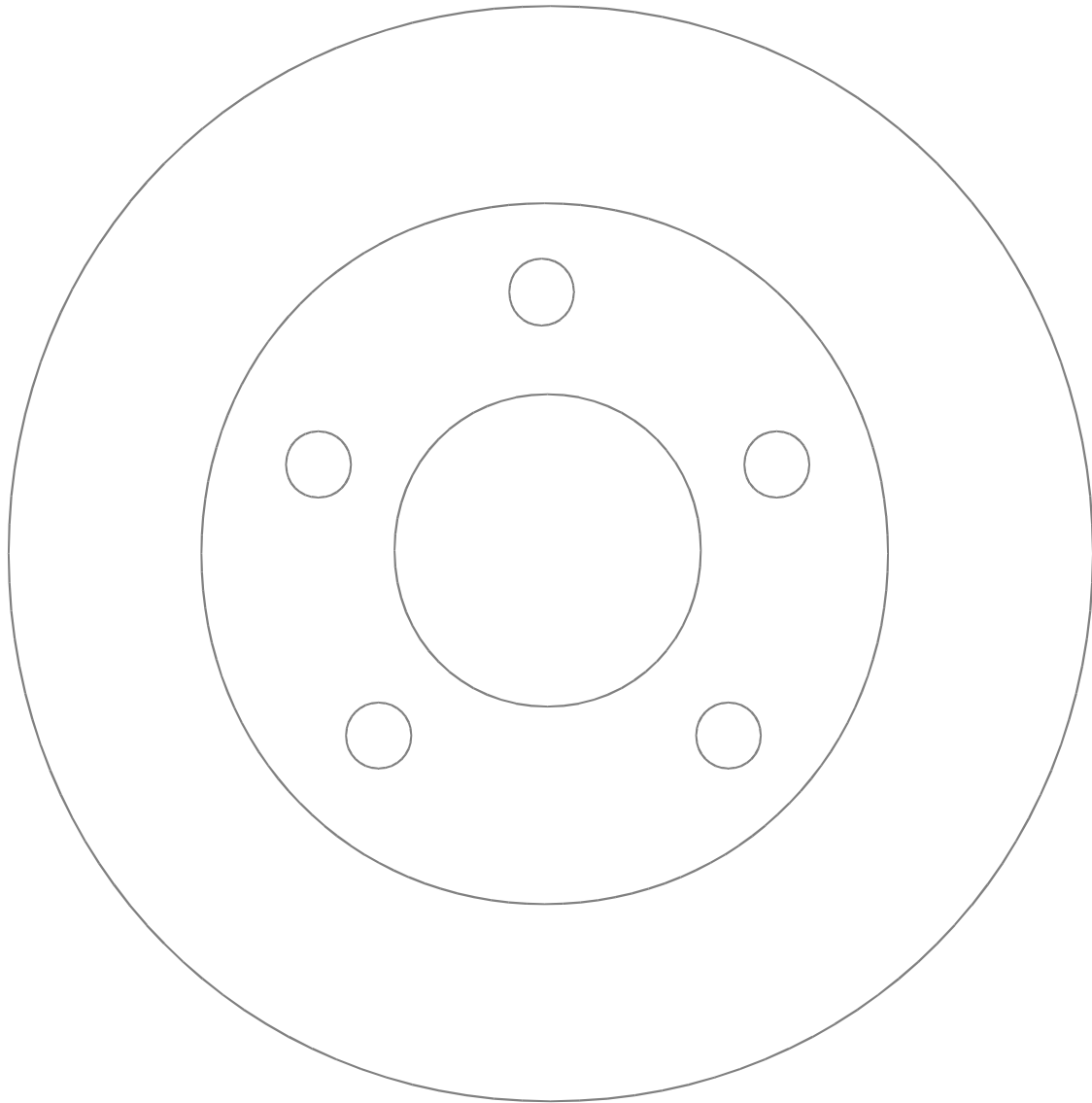
The three centre-most circles represent the three novellas that comprise the Sem Inna Werq trilogy and how the novellas blend into each other and are tangled together.

Figure 2: Folie À Plusieurs – The Chapters



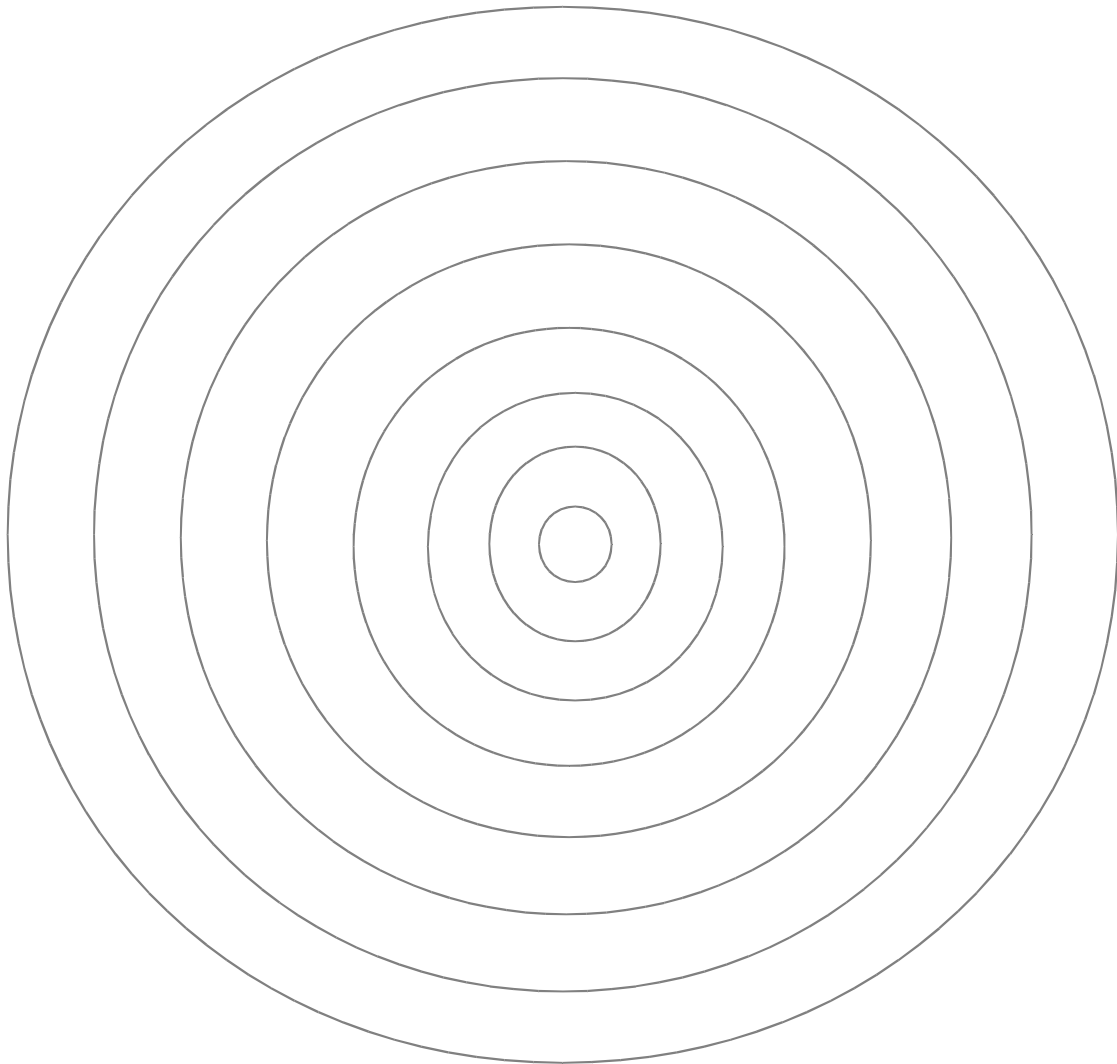
Each circle represents a chapter in the first novella. The centre-most circle being the first chapter rippling outwards to the fourth chapter which is boundless and has no borders to constrain it.

Figure 3: Folie À Plusieurs – The World



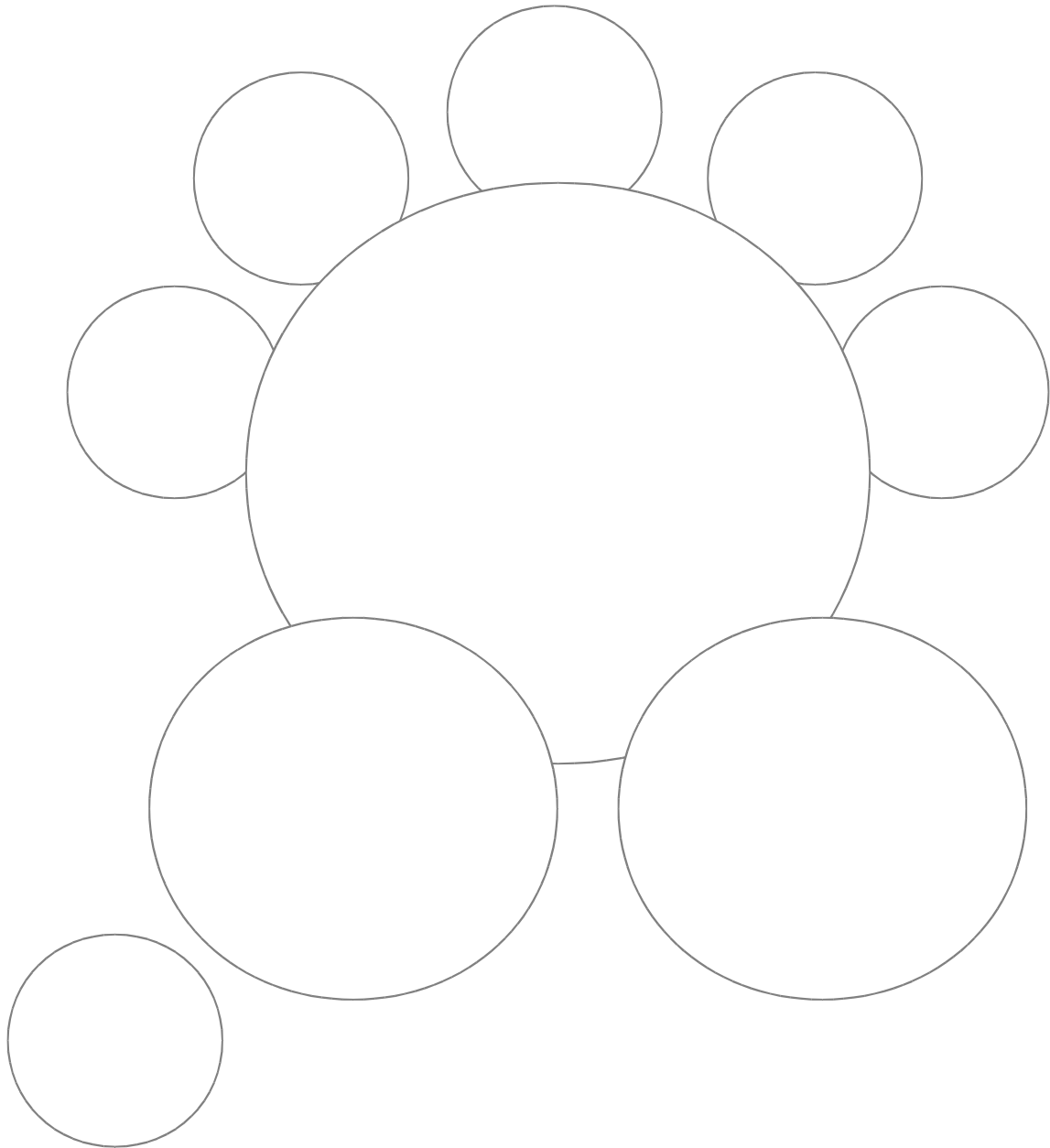
This is a map of the world into which the Girl awakens. The outer ring is the forest, the middle one is made up of the cottages in which she and the Ladies reside and the lake is at the centre.

Figure 4: Folie À Plusieurs – The Lady in Blue



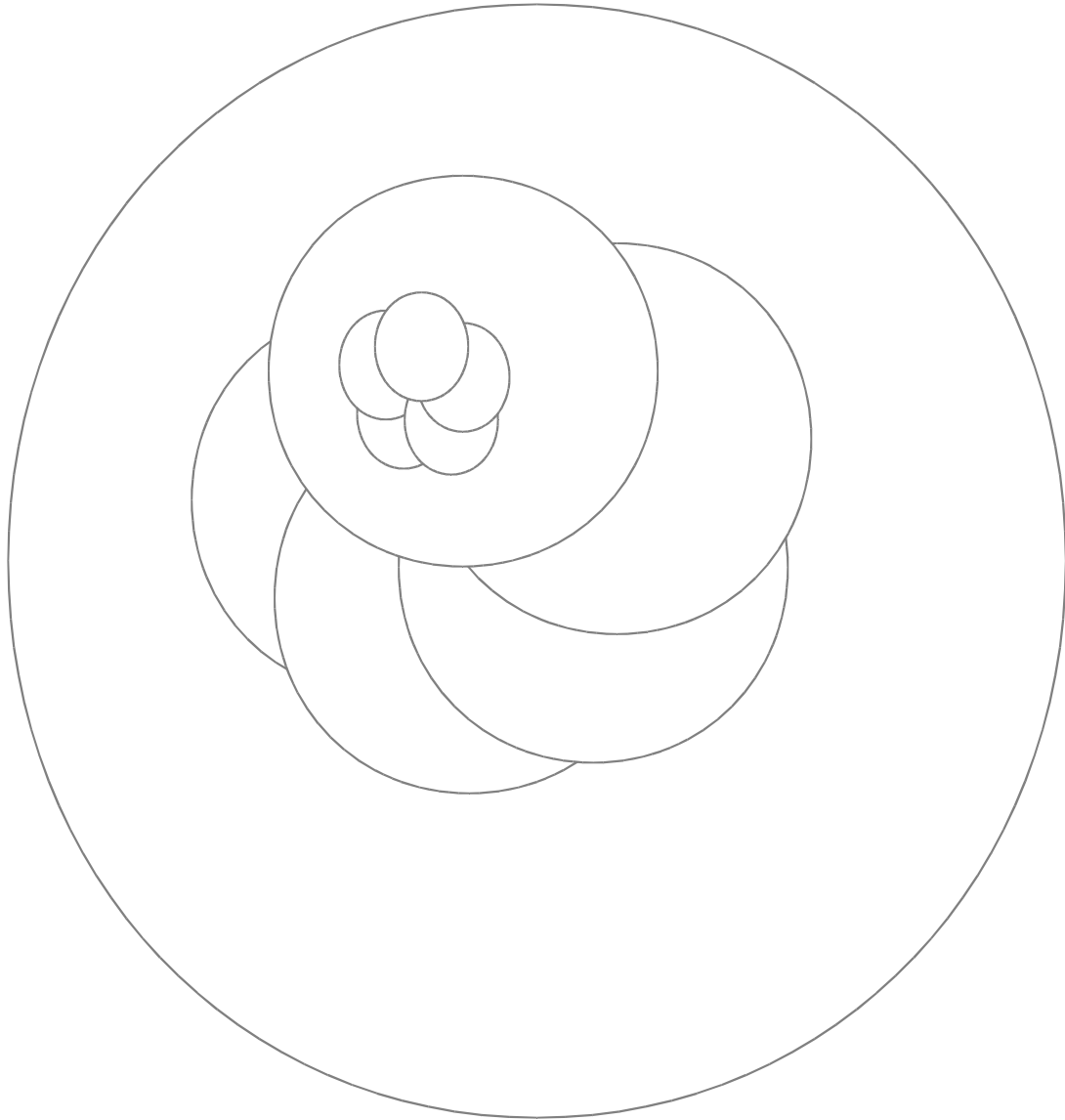
Each circle represents a tale told by the Lady in Blue. The circles ripple inwards to the central tale then ripple out again.

Figure 5: Folie À Plusieurs – The Lady in Yellow



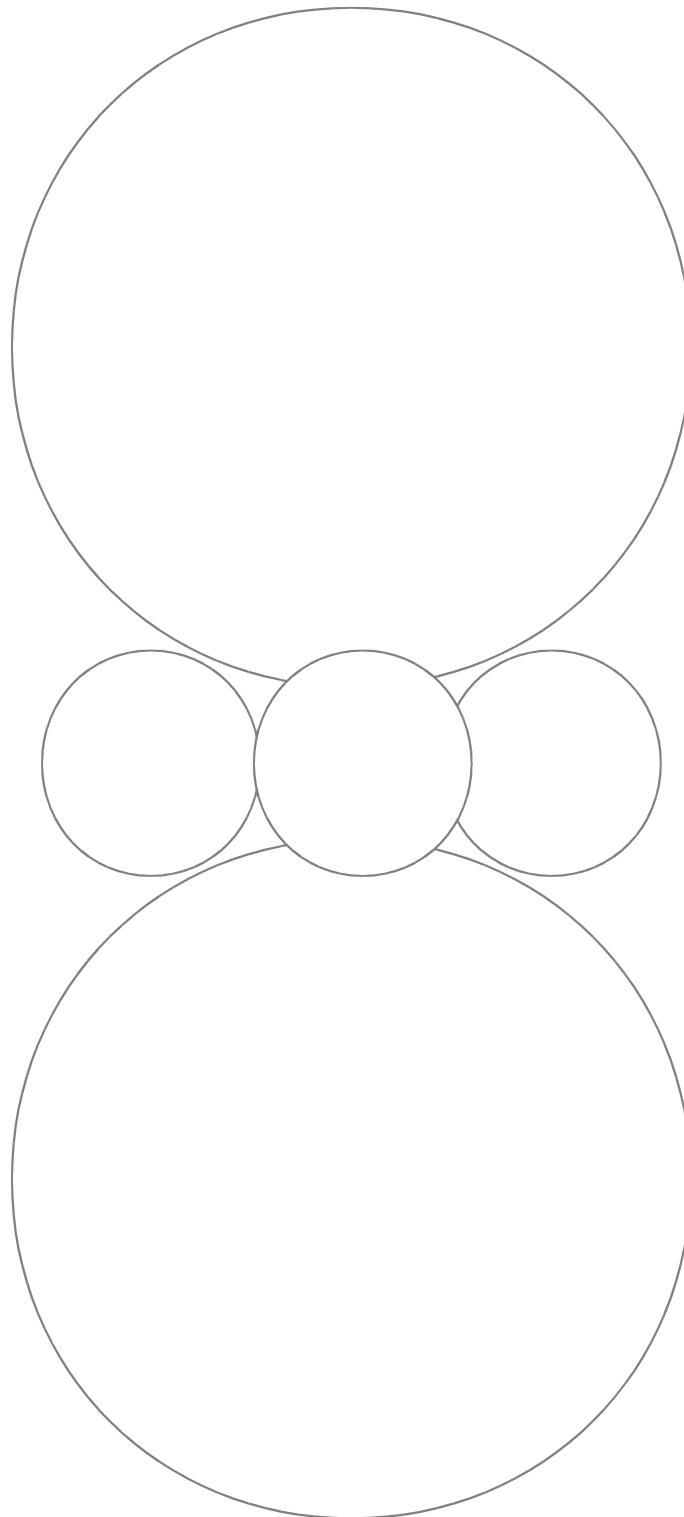
Each circle represents a journey taken by a main character. The size of the circles illustrate the size of the travelling group.

Figure 6: Folie À Plusieurs – The Lady in Green



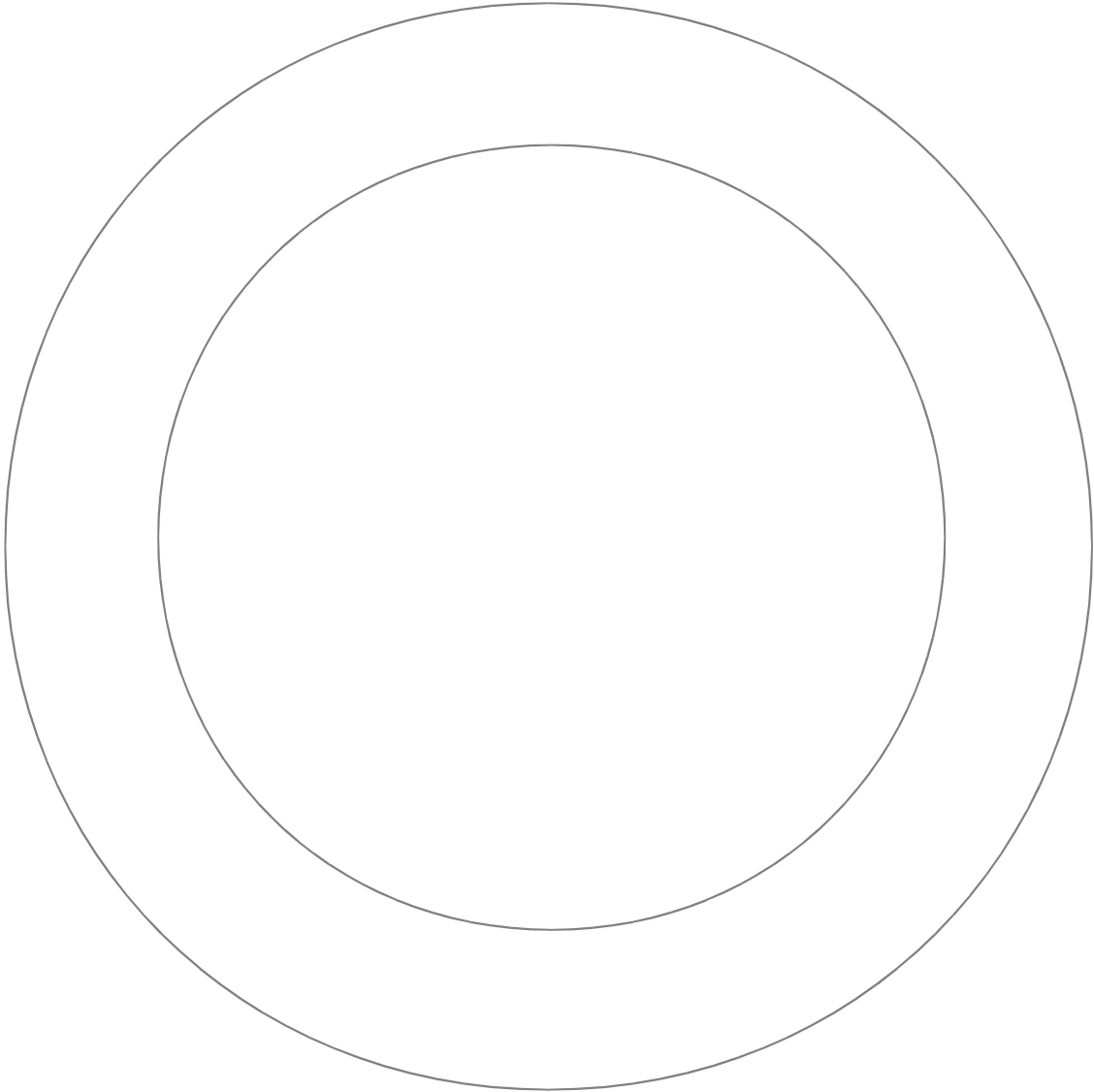
Each circle represents a different and sometimes conflicting perspective of a single cataclysmic event.

Figure 7: Folie À Plusieurs – The Lady in Red



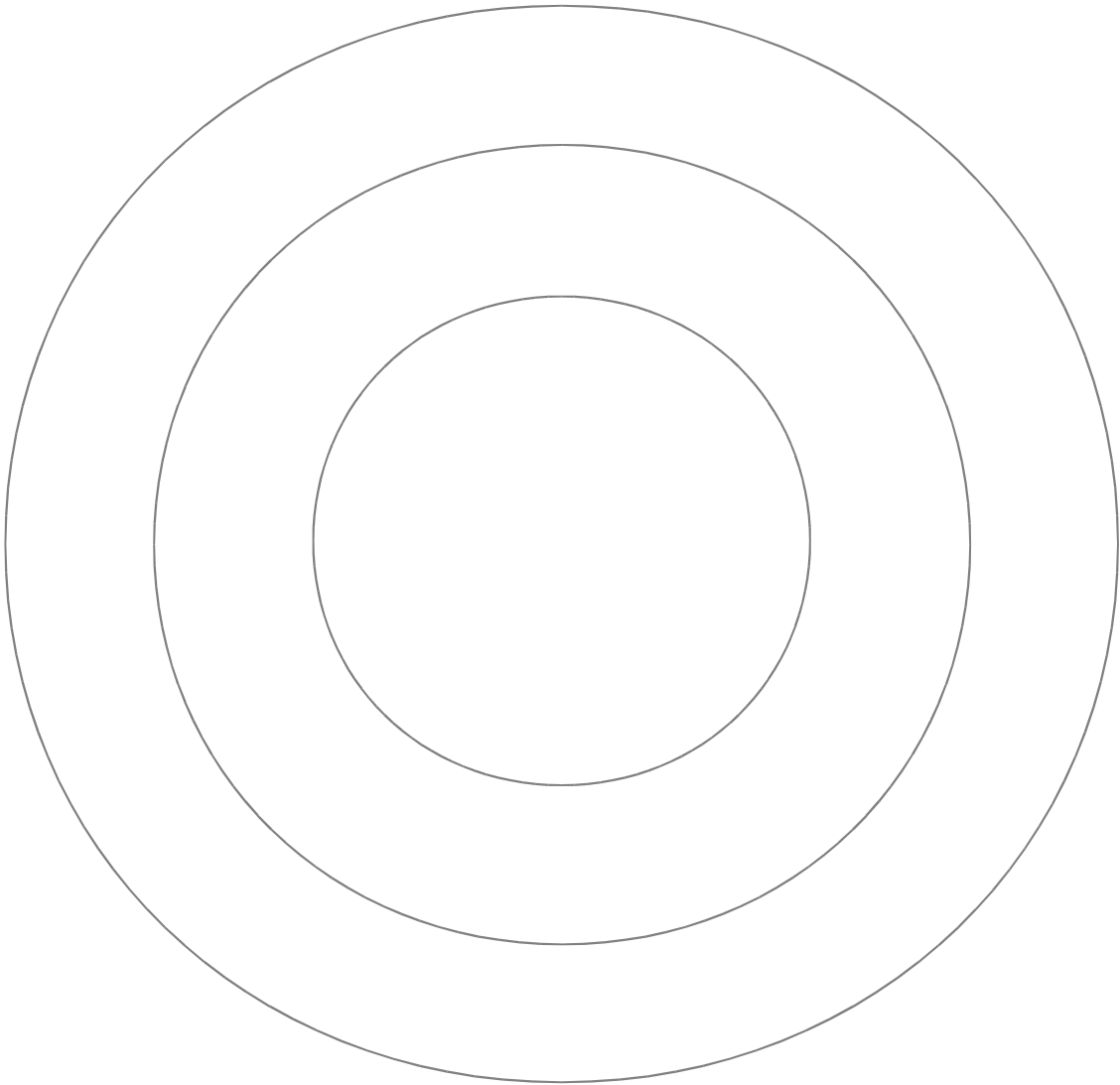
The circles represent the two co-existing realms within the tale and the three characters caught between them – two queens and an old man.

Figure 8: Queens of Meroë



The circles represent the two-fold fiction of the second novella, in which the diary masquerades as an academic work and, vice versa, the academic work masquerades as a diary.

Figure 9: አርበኛ



Each circle represents the voice of, respectively, the child (flames), the mother (waves), and the country (earth).

The first three figures reflect the structure of my initial writing plans while the later ones emerged organically out of the development of my thesis and its ideas. It was only when looking back on the novellas that I was able to observe that the physical structure of the stories had begun to reflect its contents. This is most evident in Figures 4 – 7, in which the lady's tales from *Folie À Plusieurs* take fanciful shape. When I study the diagrams I see a rippling lake, an udder, a shell and an infinity symbol respectively, and each image seems to reveal a deeper truth about the story it symbolises. In this way the diagrams also serve as further examples of bricolage that add another layer of meaning, an additional interpretation to the texts. The circle also appears throughout my thesis, reflected in the journeys of my novella's characters, the anecdotes of my personal experiences and the intrinsic nature of the Exile's Journey. The circles in the diagrams expand and contract to reflect the vagaries of existence, just as our understanding of the world around us and ourselves within it is both clarified and confused by the passage of time.

Sem Inna Werq challenges both the raising of certain stories to the level of historical fact while branding others as untrustworthy or untrue (when it is often the case that deeper investigations reveal truths never before conceived), and the precedence given to written documents while relegating other forms of knowledge (such as those communicated through song or story) to the 'nether' regions of mysticism and fantasy. My novellas reflect my idea that human beings communicate in a plethora of ways and in order to fully understand who we once were, who we are today and who we may well one day become, we must be open to all the ways in which people have transmitted knowledge and wisdom to one another throughout the ages. The world positively breathes with our whispers, the stories we tell, the songs we sing, the laws we enforce, the settlements we build, the moments that pass between us in communication – silent or otherwise – all of these together contribute to our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in and they serve to inspire, enrich, and challenge my research.

To Graeme Harper, the multiplicity of ways of being and of recording history are a reflection of human nature within the world at large, an assertion that harkens back to bricolage and the concept of layering:

[Each] of these pieces of creative writing is an imprint of personal and cultural conditions, each is an etching on the surface of communication of something that lies below.¹⁴

¹⁴ Graeme Harper, "Making Fiction from Fact, Making Fact of Your Fiction" in Steel, Jayne ed. *Wordsmithery: The Writer's Craft and Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 212-227, 27.

As I am interested in creating literature from personal experience, concepts that investigate the instability of the subject, the necessity of admitting fiction into the process, and using the personal to access bigger experiences are of particular interest to me. Sem Inna Werq has benefited from my own experiences as an exile and an outsider, in that it reflects my belief in the subjectivity of perspective and the necessity of multiplicity in the analysis of human behaviour. The novella mirrors my childhood between two cultures, between two sometimes disparate truths, two disparate chronicles of history – each insisting upon its validity. As I continued to travel – to China and Japan, Brazil and Mexico, Slovakia and Switzerland – I continued to collect stories, perspectives, truths; learning as I went, that life could never be simplified into black and white, truth and fiction, that it existed rather in the in-between grey spaces.

Marjorie Garber speaks to the fluidity of 'fact' in relation to personal history when she states that

[for] the biographer and the autobiographer, postmodernity means understanding that there is no secure external vantage point from which one can see clearly and objectively, can 'realise' the subject...That biography – and, even more, autobiography – is a species of fiction-making is a truth so old that only a willed cultural amnesia can make it new.¹⁵

This 'flight into fiction' or blurring of the line between author and autobiographer is linked to the point I raised earlier about the potential for creative work to allow for greater honesty when writing oneself, serving almost as a mirror which deflects the reader's direct gaze away from the author and points it, rather, inwards.

Vivian Gornick shares a similar sensitivity for the tension at the heart of all biographical work, the empty spaces between 'self' and 'other', and how that dichotomy is expressed within writing – between the author, the characters within the text, and the reader who encounters them. Gornick argues that

[a] useful point of view, one that would permit greater freedom of association...had to be brought along. What I didn't see, and that for a long while, was that this point of view could only emerge from a narrator who was me and at the same time not me.¹⁶

¹⁵ Garber, Marjorie. "Postmodernism and the Possibility of Biography," in *The Seductions of Biography*, eds. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York: Routledge, 1996)

¹⁶ Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002), 22.

Sem Inna Werq is the prism through which I filter the light of my experiences, casting them out in a million different directions, concealing myself behind a multitude of characters, allowing all my selves to speak, all my realities to play out. My mother and I (and even Ethiopia) appear in numerous incarnations within my novellas, revealing aspects of our many truths. Unfurling my critical research within the heart of creative writing was necessary to challenging singular notions of identity by allowing myself to remain many, by refusing to be uncomplicated and diminished in translation. It also freed me from my fear of negative judgement, from my hesitation to insist upon myself and gave me the courage to weave my tale into the tapestry of human experience, to shine my hard-won clarity outwards so that others may benefit from it in due course.

The inherent difficulty of self-reflection is remarked upon by Christine Brooke-Rose when she writes that

[the] topic of an essay or novel, while I work on it, becomes the most important topic in the world for me, otherwise I couldn't work on it. To write, therefore, about myself as writer, as I have increasingly been asked to do, is very difficult without sounding self-important.¹⁷

This is a process re-enacted in human relations often: it is not uncommon for a person to speak of 'their friend's problems' rather than admitting said problems as their own – for this person 'the friend' functions as deflector, as 'judgement-catcher' as it were, just as the interplay between truth and fiction, author and character do for the author. This method of writing (which is enacted in the lyrical symbolism of Sem Inna Werq and the fluid nature of the exile's journey) is akin to the side-long peek of a shy but friendly stranger, easily ignored perhaps, but charming for its gentle approach. I have often found in my travels that it is surprisingly easy for people to bridge the distances between cultures (even when language differences transform communication into a delicate waltz of hints given and clues found) as long as there is a calm willingness on both sides to observe carefully and to respond with respect – conditions that are easy to meet when individuals remain aware of the multiplicity of perspectives within the world and are careful not to privilege theirs above all others.

As a shy child and an Ethiopian growing up in the United States of America, I often struggled to find a balance between what I knew myself to be (in a political, historical, cultural context) and what many of the Americans I met believed me to be. It is a struggle that followed me

¹⁷ Brooke-Rose, Christine. *Stories, theories, and things*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

into adulthood and is, even now, playing itself out within the pages of this thesis. Being a history buff, I have devoured books on Ethiopia my whole life, supplementing the first-hand accounts and half-remembered anecdotes I have been told. I have seen how even written knowledge passes quickly into the archives of human experiences, where it fades to dust and is forgotten. It is the stories people share that have outlasted the libraries of yesteryear. The tales that unfurl from their memories and are recalled from their histories replicate out into infinity, gaining immortality as a reward for long service, whispering ancient wisdom well into humanity's tomorrows. Orality allows for a story to be written over and adapted in a way that resonates with the times, for modern significance to be injected and new meaning to be derived.

At the intersection between truth and lies and 'shape-shifting' author/narrators, Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir raises the importance of memory as historical artefact, especially in the context of an autobiographical work. To Gudmundsdottir, the performance of autobiography 'attempts to explain the past, and tries to let the past explain her present'. It also involves a process of selection and omission (circling back to bricolage and Robin Nelson's assertion as to the rigour inherent in the practice as research methodology) that is perhaps as important as what is included:

the autobiographical process must also involve forgetting, as the writer chooses one memory and discards another, writes one version of that memory at the cost of another, probably equally valid, version.¹⁸

Memory (both collective and personal) and nostalgia are wrapped up tightly with the act of writing the personal. The fallibility of memory has been a point of some argument in the field of nostalgia studies with many theorists, such as Svetlana Boym (who defines nostalgia as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'), arguing that nostalgia is built on an idealised dream of a questionable past.¹⁹ While the subject of nostalgia, which I prefer to define more generally as a yearning or longing for the past (most usually a time or place), is a fraught one it is also, undeniably, a condition that is only growing in our ever-shrinking, fast-paced modern world. My experience of engaging with nostalgia and memory, as both source of my enquiry and method of practice has been a complicated one that surprised me with the insight it provided. The study of nostalgia was one I approached with open-minded interest, so I was surprised by the fact that many of the theorists I encountered viewed it primarily as a negative. Nostalgia is viewed as an unwillingness to commit to the present, an affliction based in the individual's inability to surrender

¹⁸ Gudmundsdottir, Gunnthorunn. *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing (Postmodern Studies)* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2003), 12.

¹⁹ Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.

to reality, a childish clinging to past hopes and broken dreams. My mother's stories on the other hand cast nostalgia in quite a different light. Within the cadence of her tales, nostalgia and memory functioned as the threads that bound our present with our history. Together they formed the spinal column of the spiritual side of human development. Recalling the past allows us to imagine a future in which we too will be remembered, it is a nod to the continuum that is human existence, and any attempts to sever individuals from their pasts do not take into account that to do so is to effectively sever a person from their humanity.

Nostalgia is also fascinating as a concept that has existed in a variety of forms across numerous cultures. There is *tizita* (remembrance) in Ethiopia, *sehnsucht* (yearning) and *weltschmerz* (world-weariness that reality can never match the dreams of the mind) in Germany, *saudade* (longing for absent someone/thing that one loves and secretly knows will never return) in the Portuguese-speaking world, *mono no aware* (awareness of the transience of things and the deeper sadness that this is the reality of life) in Japan. In Wales, there is *hiraeth*, which is defined loosely as homesickness overcast with grief for what has been lost. Val Bethell writes of his sense of home by evoking the concept of *hiraeth* as something uncontrollable, soul deep and almost at odds to reason or logic:

Hiraeth – the link with the long-forgotten past, the language of the soul, the call from the inner self. Half forgotten – fraction remembered. It speaks from the rocks, from the earth, from the trees and in the waves. It's always there.

Yes, I hear it.

Yes, I understand what hiraeth means.²⁰

In living so far from home, I have often found myself set adrift upon the churning emotions of nostalgic daydreams. A look, a scent, a taste – and I was home again, back in Ethiopia, back to the villa in Addis, back at my mother's side. To that place where, whatever the push and pull, whatever the tensions that had arisen and dissipated between us, I could just be. To the mother who knew me for the shape-shifting trickster that I was, who had learned to recognize my many forms, and always encouraged me to greater complexity. Again my mother walks the tightrope, this time between accepting me in all my multiplicity and challenging me to greater heights. But my yearning for home in all its manifestations (mother and country alike) goes beyond the mere object of desire and reflects the person I become when I am there. I love who I am when I am in Ethiopia. I take on a

²⁰ Bethell, Val. *Hiraeth*. Published: March 2003.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/val_bethell_01.shtml>

significance that imbues me with a confidence I have never felt anywhere else. It is the confidence of shared stories, common blood, of roots dug deep into the black soil to which I will one day return.

Even my name is redeemed from well-intended mispronunciations that render it meaningless, or hastily applied nicknames (Minnie, for example) which symbolically reduced my scale and importance. In Amharic, ምኞት (Mignotte) translates as 'my wish'. It is a name born of my mother's desire for a last child and a second daughter to balance out her trio. Every time a stranger verbalises their dreams they invoke my name like a prayer. It is a heady feeling and rather intriguing when compared to the diminishing quality of Minnie. What's in a name? In Ethiopia, at least, where the meaning lies just under the skin, a name means a great deal indeed. Names are imbued with the best intentions of both parents, and children are even sometimes benighted with first names that sync with the last to craft full statements dedicated to the family's glory. For example the name: Sheferaw Shigutay (Sheferaw: a thousand feared him. Shigutay: my gun) translates as 'a thousand feared my gun'. Names are also critical in Sem Inna Werq, both when they have been omitted and when they have been included, they serve to indicate character, intention or to conceal the same. In *Folie À Plusieurs* there are no names, as the novella focuses on that initial phase of self-discovery in which everything is uncertain and all things are in flux. *Queens of Meroë* signals a re-engagement with the home culture (and in my case, my return to Ethiopia for my field-trip) and it is shot through with Ethiopian names, the meanings of which are often included – so that they function as personality traits in and of themselves – to add another layer of complexity to the characters and their histories. This inclusion of names and their meanings as another method of understanding an individual and their history ties back to concepts of multiplicity and it allows me (and my mother and my country as well) to shape-shift between different characters in my novellas while signposting my journey in a delicate and understated way.

In this way, the personal and cultural interplay between author and character, reader and writer, between story-teller and listener, is of interest when discussing especially evocative words such as nostalgia and its many variations. Luce Irigaray's conception of 'the pure signifier of the subject's experience, the *other* author who is never present in the text' is also very resonant. This is tied back to Gornick's concept of the narrator as 'me but not me', to bricolage, and to the layering of voices, of truth and fiction, as a condition of autobiographical expression. Irigaray's idea of 'Le Parler Femme' (woman-speak), which appears spontaneously when women are present together, but which disappears as soon as men are present is another example of the complexity inherent in mother/daughter relationships. Frustratingly, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she writes that: 'I simply

cannot give you an account of woman-speak. One speaks it, it cannot be meta-spoken'.²¹ 'Le Parler Femme' is especially relevant as my novellas investigate mother/daughter relationships and conversations (my mother's storytelling, and the interviews she granted me) within a male-centric global context. *Sem Inna Werq* is primarily about women speaking to one another, about the conversations they share, the stories they tell, the wisdom they impart and the secrets they keep silent. While men are featured and do speak within my novellas, it is the women who are at the centre of the action, the women who are discussed, and the women who propel the plot with their insight and will. *Folie À Plusieurs* especially revels in women's conversations, each chapter stars a new story-teller employing her craft in a bid to trigger deeper truths. It also is a story that speaks through the generations, a mother to her daughter, and the daughter to her child, and tries to lay bare the difficulties of maintaining woman-centric relationships in a society that requires a masculine (and, more often than not, Caucasian) presence to denote worth and inject importance. In fact, the *Queens of Meroë* acknowledges this bias by casting a British man as protagonist of a tale that is about everything but him. As the *Queens of Meroë* unfolds, it becomes clear that it is really a woman who is at the centre of the tale, women who imbue the story with their experiences and that it is a feminine force that drives the plot. *À l'Œil* emerges as a distilled conversation, one that has been clarified through the exile's journey and the previous two novellas. In it, three feminine voices emerge from the silence, the mother, the daughter and their country.

This tightening of the tale reflects my own experiences of 'pursuing' my mother through both my lived experiences and by engagement with critical theory. My relationship with my mother is one that has blossomed over the years, with my entry into adulthood and my willingness to accept her as an individual who is ultimately unknowable to me, to accept her dual role as mother and stranger besides, and to understand that she must be allowed to exist outside of me (just as I demanded that I be allowed to exist beyond her when I was a teenager testing the tensile strength of the threads that bound us). My mother did not belong to me as my childish arrogance had once demanded she must and realising this had a profound impact on my understanding of motherhood and what it meant to be a woman. It also strengthened my interest in who she was before and beyond me, who she would be to me now that I was a woman in my own right, and how our relationship would develop and progress as I started my own family. I knew that what I saw in her would find its echo in my own future. In the course of this thesis and while conducting interviews with her, I have deepened my understanding of my mother and realised that our relationship is entirely different from the one I had with my father. My father was a devoted and caring parent,

²¹ Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977). Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 141.

playful and dynamic, and when he passed away during my second year of my undergraduate degree, my family and I were utterly devastated. But there is something about my link to my mother that goes beyond words and stutters into meaningful silence. It is, perhaps, the strangeness of seeing myself but forty years hence, of knowing that I am understood, the sensation of being truly seen – as a woman, by the woman from which I came – that makes the mother/daughter dynamic especially relevant to my journey of self-discovery.

Kristeva, in a similar attempt as Irigaray to describe the relationship between language and the feminine, introduces the concept of the chora, which is defined as the

pre-lingual stage of development...dominated by a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings, and needs [and in its rhythmic] ruptures and flows of bodily and vocal rhythm [associates itself with the semiotic, the maternal, and the feminine].²²

This gendered approach to language is important because my thesis hinges on the distinctive tales that a mother tells her daughter, on the constraints and complexities at the heart of a matriarchal relationship set within a patriarchal social structure. The mother and daughter dynamic, in particular is an interesting and unique one to examine in the sense that it is an often fraught relationship of silences and nuances. This is a situation that Nancy Friday argues is born out of society's patriarchal framework and was reflected by her mother's

denial of whatever she could not tell me, that her mother could not tell her, and about which society enjoined us both to keep silent, [and which] distorts our relationship still.²³

In this way the mother and daughter dynamic is noteworthy and therefore requires the specific investigation which underpins my thesis. To this end, the conversations I conducted with my mother were fundamental in influencing the rhythm and structure of my novellas and critical work, and our unique relationship of gaps and silences is reflected in the omission of the final transcripts from the final draft of this text. It was also interesting, and worth noting, that I was required to apply for and receive Ethical Approval (a process I went through with positive results) before I was allowed to interview my own mother about her past and our lives together. Having to seek Ethical Approval got me thinking about the ownership of stories, the communal nature of orality, and helped to

²² Felluga, Dino. "Terms used by psychoanalysis." *Introductory guide to critical theory*. Retrieved January 27 (2002): 2003.

²³ Friday, Nancy. *My mother/my self: The daughter's search for identity*. Random House Digital, Inc., 2010. (27)

cement my assertions that my mother did not belong to me, and that sharing the transcripts of our interviews would risk overexposing the both of us. The interviews appear instead as stories in Sem Inna Werq, as words spoken by a myriad of characters, descriptions given, conversations shared, as dreamscapes imagined. My mother's words bleed into the text of my experience and dye it with her presence, just as they have always done.

The stories that my mother shared with me, I realise now, were charmingly insidious, fascinating for what she chose to leave out as much as what she included. She filled her stories with women warriors – both battle-hardened adventurers and strong-willed heroines of the everyday – doing her utmost to both fulfil my yearning for feminine role models and to counteract the sexist bombardment of popular media and society at large. Patricia Duncker speaks to the same yearning for heroines when she writes that:

[as] a woman reader I can occupy every fictional space. And better still, run the gauntlet of mortal danger. What are women's adventure stories? What adventures lie in wait for us? How can we find them? How can we be heroes? I want a fiction of heroines who are transgressors in gendered space, women who are straight talkers, radically independent of all conventions and ideologies, women who know their own minds, act on their own desires, women who are duplicitous, cunning, double. Women who can fight, with their fists and words and teeth, women who win, women like us.²⁴

I have always written myself into my stories. Writing was always a way for me to indulge my most adventurous and daredevil fantasies, I could test the bounds of my morality as a cold-blooded assassin or overcome my fears as a warrior queen whose valour and strength in battle brought civilisations to their knees, I could play the cunning diplomat or the tactless cattle-wrangler. I could be many, I could be other, I could just 'be' – safe from society's insistence that destiny is dictated by gender, race and class. Yet, despite a lifetime spent in dreaming of heroines – in trying to be one, trying to write one – even I sometimes find myself defaulting to the masculine when delving into the realms of fantasy. While writing *Folie À Plusieurs*, I wrote the entirety of the second chapter (wherein we meet the Golden, Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and Iron Ones) without realising that all the main characters were men and it required having my attention drawn to it for me to understand what I had done. Going back and re-imagining the tale to include a single woman radically transformed

²⁴ Roberts, Michelle and Patricia Duncker. "*The Difference of View*". University of East Anglia. School of English and American Studies. *Pretext*. Vol. 1. EAS Publishing, 1999.

the meaning, significance and symbolism of the tale. It is also worth noting that I had the sense that the story realised my error before I did (a strange phenomenon that occurred too many times to count in the course of my research), in that the Golden One was easily, and with very little editing, able to represent one of my mother's many manifestations and to symbolise the 'truth' beneath the wax veneer at the heart of the story. Reasserting the feminine with the Golden One added a layer of dissonance and complexity to a tale that was at first the mere recounting of the adventures of a group of comrades – no different from a million others. With the onset of my second novella, my insistence on the feminine had gained in confidence, highlighting the first novella (the one that deals with the difficulties inherent in crafting an individual identity in a heavily biased and subconsciously affecting societal framework) as the one in which I struggled most to find my voice – rather fitting considering that the novellas echo and enact my exile's journey.

It could be argued that adventure has long been the reserve and privilege of men who are thrown out into the world to shape it, while women have been cast inward – their journey is more often directed towards a place of spiritual peace than of passionate adventure. Other than the stories my mother made sure to tell me and the little that I wrote, novels starring swashbuckling heroines whom I could emulate, even in my fantasies, were hard to find when I was growing up – a situation Carl Jung explains as being due to the fact that

[girls] in our society share in the masculine hero myths because like boys, they must develop a reliable ego-identity and acquire an education... When the ancient content of the psyche begins to make its appearance, [at] the modern young level, [a woman is] trying to change herself into a more subversive kind of woman. As she [grows] older and [begins] to see that for a man, life is something that has to be taken by storm, as an act of heroic will; but for a woman to feel right about herself, life is best realized by a process of awakening. A universal myth expressing this kind of awakening is found in that fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast.²⁵

It was always the dichotomy that struck me most in such thinking, the unnecessary divisions erected and the forced choice between 'heroic will' and 'spiritual awakening', masculine and feminine, when in a sense both journeys are one and the same, each impossible without the other. There are a myriad paths to travel and a million ways to traverse them and it is vital that we be wary of falling into, as Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche calls it, “the danger of a single story”, an

²⁵ Jung, Carl Gustav and Marie-Luise von Franz. *Man and his Symbols*. Dell, 1968.

entreaty that once again recalls the 'lure and blur' of layering and bricolage. It is a method that is easily strayed from – a discovery I made when it was pointed out to me that my initial draft of this statement of poetics was nearly completely lacking in personal insight and creative input. I confess that even I, who am basing my entire thesis on the importance of personal history and creative context, found it easy to default unthinkingly to the 'accepted' academic language of enquiry into which I had been indoctrinated. But this work requires the injection of both the personal and the creative to fully realise its potential and understand its subject matter, and it was only after doing so that I was able to comprehend the entirety of the exile's journey.

It is necessary then, to complicate our understanding of what it means to be human by blurring the lines between 'oppositions'. There are many realities, and only once they are layered one upon another (like sheets of vellum or tracing paper in an artist's studio) is the truth revealed. A wonderful example of this is *Meursault, contre-enquête* a novel by the Algerian writer Kamel Daoud. The novel takes Albert Camus' novel *L'Étranger*, in which the French narrator Meursault shoots to death an unnamed Arab on the beach, and reclaims the story of the dead man, giving the character depth, responding to a colonist mentality that always puts itself at the centre, and complicating our understanding of history and the multiplicity of perspective. This idea of multi-layering is resonant with both *Ethiopian Wax and Gold* verse and the idea of the palimpsest, defined by Nelson as:

a parchment or the like from which writing has been partially erased to make room for another text. Or with the contemporary inflection, drawing on an archaeological metaphor, a palimpsest is a multi-layered text, the traces of previous inscriptions remaining visible in the new text.²⁶

This idea of layering also reflects what I am doing by weaving my interviews into the tapestry of my novellas and writing over (but not obscuring) my mother's stories and my country's history. This process of recycling and rebirth forms a bridge between past and present, and whispers of the future.

What is never discarded – but is rather recycled and re-purposed – gains a sort of immortality. And writing, as Hélène Cixous argues, may prove to be

a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, or never

²⁶ Nelson, Robin. Set Map Slip = Palimpsest (working title), *Performance Research* 6, no.2 (2001):20.

letting oneself be surprised by the abyss.²⁷

Cixous' words are also reminiscent of the idea of rebirth and renewal, which travels throughout Sem Inna Werq. The world in which the *Queens of Meroë* is set is one that I created for an assignment while studying for my Masters. But the sensation that the story was not done with me yet, that the story could be much more, that the world could be a vehicle through which to discover deeper truths stayed with me and in resurrecting the Queens for Sem Inna Werq, I feel I have finally done the tale justice. አርበኛ, in particular, enacts the theme of continual rebirth and features a favourite saying of my mother's. ሴት፡ልድ፡መወለድ፡እናትን፡መወለድ፡ነዉ። (read: seit lij mehwled inatin mehwled new), translates as: 'to deliver a daughter is to give birth to one's own mother' and echoes the recurring theme of immortality through story-telling that shimmers beneath the surface of my novellas. While my thesis focuses on the mother/daughter dynamic, it could be argued, of course, that a mother's tales to her son, or a father's to either his son or daughter are all worth investigating and understanding in their own right. I argue, however, that due to the personal nature of the study necessary to unravel such relationships and as I have privileged access to my own memories that I do not have to other people's, my thesis is able to fully explore the issue from a personal standpoint with the intention that it will function, in the future, as a control to which others can compare their own experiences and upon which further research can be developed. My mother's profound influence on my self-fashioning, the silences inherent in our conversations with one another, the habit I have of echoing her history, the circular nature (being one of continual rebirth) of the mother daughter relationship – reaching across the decades we have been apart and the kilometres that have separated us and shone through the prism of her storytelling – is both investigated and enacted within the pages of my critical and creative research.

The foundation of my novellas and thesis is built upon my own personal experiences as an Ethiopian woman struggling to cope with separation from my mother and the loss of my home culture, while seeking a place to belong in a world where I often find myself a stranger. Creative writing can serve as both a catharsis (a way of sharing secrets, confessing sins, and investigating possibilities) and a catalyst for understanding and creating identity, and it could be argued, is a process that is enriched by the experience of exile. In the words of Julia Kristeva:

The creative act is released by an experience of depression without which we could not call into question the stability of meaning or the banality of expression.

A writer must at one time or another have been in a situation of loss – of ties, of

²⁷ Cixous, Hélène. "Coming to writing and other essays". Harvard University Press, 1991.

meaning – in order to write.²⁸

The experience of loss, of lack of ties, felt by exiled daughters when separated from their mother(land)s gives credence to the use of creative writing, melding fiction and autobiography, to reveal deeper situational truths about nostalgia, the relationship forged between mothers and daughters, and the circular quest (the exile's journey) for identity.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of polyphony and heteroglossia also help to make a case for the existence of a multiplicity in narratives and perspectives within literature and in the use of language. Hence the structure of this submission, and those of my creative works (see diagrams 1 – 9) – an attempt to explore and enact his concept. Heteroglossia also serves to echo Irigaray's concept of *Le Parler Femme* and 'the signifier never present in the text', both of which are issues that my writing addresses obsessively, and that are played out in the framing and layering of my creative works with my mother's interviews and my decision to withhold the transcripts of our conversations. This language of silence (especially stressed in the mother/daughter dynamic) is indicative of Bakhtin's assertion that a language is 'shot through with intentions and accents' and is infused with many voices:

social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions.²⁹

To Bakhtin, it is the conglomeration of these many voices within a language that gives power to a novel. His theory can, however, be developed further to include non-fictional or critical forms that play on the boundaries of fiction. *Sem Inna Werq* is imbued, in this fashion, with the many experiences, perspectives and voices that I have both encountered in my travels and extrapolated from my memories.

Further, the idea that language itself is heavy with history, with the voices of its storytellers, is redolent of the palimpsest and bricolage, of the creative act of recycling, tracing over and building upon. This layering, as U.K. Hurley argues, unleashes

[an] extraordinary potentiality...akin to the network of sacred trees in the film

²⁸ Kristeva, Julia. "A question of subjectivity-an interview." *Modern Literary Theory* (1989): p.128-134.

²⁹ Bakhtin, M. Mikhail Mikhailovich. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). (262-3)

Avatar, where individuals can (literally) log into a polyphonia of communal memories and histories, held in these structures like an organic archive, in scenes that seem to enact Bakhtin's ideas on heteroglossia, suggesting that, as he proposes, language is something that is always populated with the intentions of others.³⁰

Heteroglossia remains sensitive to the difficulty in speaking as 'the self' because of this quality of language as something 'populated with the intentions of others' and allows for the interpretation of writing of the self as also being a writing of the 'other'. This method of engaging with my personal history has helped me to strike down the divisions between my experiences and those of other exiles, to blunt the edges of my stories and to permit a universality of meaning to pervade my work. It allowed me to

feed off writing, and [feed] writing back into [my] life at every level – the social, personal, sexual, political, ideological, historical, psychological, poetic.³¹

This 'intertextuality' where writing meets life is also tied closely to what writing can mean, when viewed through eyes other than those of the author. This idea is linked to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, a study of how signs derive meaning within the structure of a text, as well as Roland Barthes' argument that a text's meaning is not explicit within the work itself, but rather meaning is derived from each reader as well as from other texts read. This is of particular interest to me in the construction and realisation of my creative works and how they blur the lines between the personal and the global. *Sem Inna Werq* is carefully assembled to sieve through the subconscious of the reader, to cling to the trailing tails of the reader's half-remembered memories and to entice a sensation of *déjà-vu* (and even *jamais-vu*, the unusual feeling that something familiar is entirely new) and engender sympathy for the subject. The novellas also make use of storytelling as proof of maternity, as a link between generations of women, and as the foundation of an exile's manifold identities.

For Kristeva, intertextuality refers to

a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.

The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language

³⁰ Hurley, U.K. "Walking in the world of ruins: explorations in the processes and products of autobiographical fiction." *International Journal of the Arts in Society* (2011).

³¹ Ives, Kelly. *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva: The Jouissance of French Feminism*. Crescent Moon Publishing, 2013.

is read as at least double.³²

This idea of poetic language as double is reminiscent of 'wax and gold' poetry and the 'absorption and transformation' of texts echoes back to my method of recycling a previously written world to enact the exile's journey in *Queens of Meroë*. Bakhtin's theory also allows for the melding of the critical and the creative by questioning the assumption that they are two very separate lines of inquiry without any overlap. It also questions traditional notions of knowing and challenges the privileging of some forms of knowledge over others. U.K. Hurley further develops the idea

of treating the story as simultaneously both fiction and non-fiction, short story and autobiography, applying Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia of the text. Such an interpretation would allow the text to sustain all the possible readings [...] existing at once as a polyphonic entity from which readers, via their decision about the status of the discourse they are reading, would select their own interpretations [...] If, as Bakhtin says, language is something that is always populated with the intentions of others, then readers [...] imposing their own intentions upon texts which are more open than most to multiple generic classifications and polyphonic readings.³³

This fluid interpretation of a text would allow for a more interdisciplinary interpretation and understanding of the human experience by bridging varied forms of human expression and acknowledging the importance of the individual in the weaving of the global fabric. The idea of simultaneous fiction and non-fiction, which allows for the varied facets of human nature to fully express themselves, is at the heart of my project. To bridge the gap between my personal experiences and those of a global nature (to utilise fiction to access truth), I found it useful to fictionalise my mother's voice in order to allow her to speak more candidly and to locate a mode of writing capable of sustaining contradiction and complexity while I staged my investigation.

Sem Inna Werq: The Exile's Journey

The three novellas are vital as both documents of process and products of the research. They perform a triple function: as original literature, as documents of process, and as critical enquiry to

³² Kristeva, Julia. "Word, dialogue, novel." *The Kristeva Reader* 36 (1986):39.

³³ Hurley, U.K. and Trimarco, P 2008, 'Less is more: completing narratives in miniature fiction', 21: Journal of Contemporary and Innovative Fiction, 1 (1), pp. 82-93

exploit the ability of the novel to sustain a critical exploration while simultaneously delivering a satisfying narrative. The novellas address the issues gleaned from both my critical research and conversations with my mother in an effort to bring to life a creative 'code of practice' that both adequately represents the experiences of the exiled daughters and their imagined communities and speaks to an authentic individual experience of 'otherness' in a way that is transferable and of use to others grappling with similar issues in a wider global context. This is both what I hope to achieve with my thesis and my original contribution to knowledge. The novellas and creative works together enact the circular exile's journey of a daughter separated from her mother through global movement.

Exile's Journey	Step One	Step Two	Step Three
Research	Narrative	Nostalgia	Identity
Theme	The Stories We Tell Others and the Stories We Tell Ourselves	Mother as Country and Country as Mother	Defining Ourselves by Otherness
Defined By	Quest	Identification	Engagement
Novella	<i>Folie À Plusieurs</i>	<i>Queens of Meroë</i>	<i>አርባኛ</i>

The novellas are an attempt to chronicle my journey of self-discovery and to convey the complexity of such a voyage. I propose that the exiled daughter's search for identity comprises a three-fold circular journey that melds stories and memories, dreams and reality. This exile's journey is enacted and explored in my creative work, through investigation into my own memories and via my research along the three different but intertwining lines of narrative, nostalgia and identity.

Step One: Narrative (The Stories We Tell Others and the Stories We Tell Ourselves)

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote that 'no single event can awaken within us a stranger totally unknown to us. To live is to be slowly born'³⁴. The first step of the exile's journey characterizes the spiritual displacement of being a stranger in search of a home, a void in search of presence. It is the quickening, that first awareness of an uninvestigated self within us. It is defined by the daughter's quest for a home culture, or set of narratives, that suits her best. Having passed a life relegated to the no-man's-land of otherness, she longs for a place where she does not need to answer for who she is, a place where she can exist in her natural state without being challenged for daring to do so. She

³⁴ De Saint-Exupéry, Antoine. *Flight to Arras*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1969.

is in search of a place to belong, of stories that leave gaps for her to fill, in search of a face that fits.

Narrative, however, is complex and my interest is in 'the stories we tell others and the stories we tell ourselves'. Stories are what the world is built upon, they rest at the intersection between global and personal history and are capable, at their best, of challenging assertions we, as a society, have long made, of deleting the kilometres between peoples, and even of helping us to discover hidden truths about our own being. The stories we choose to share (and those we do not) also highlight the tension between who we are when we are alone and how we present ourselves to others, the shape-shifting nature within all individuals that allows us to modulate our behaviour depending on the audience or locale.

The exiled daughter becomes a master of shape-shifting by necessity (to avoid unwanted attention, criticism or even abuse in the new country of her residence), but the pressure to cement an identity, to choose a home, jars her loose from her dreaming and forces her on a journey she had never planned to make (she had been quite content with her patchwork quilt world). Unfortunately identity is complex, chaotic, confusing, politicised, and it is too often burdened by the expectations of others. In this cacophony of perspectives, the exiled daughter struggles to find her footing and must sift through the contributed tales of a lifetime of experience and travel (who is she really? She has worn so many masks, taken so many forms. Is one more real than the others?). But under the din is the memory of the first stories she ever knew and of the mother who told them to her. In a sense, a culture is a series of stories that a society has agreed upon, and the mother, as the primary storyteller within a family unit (a microcosm of society), is paramount in the creating of cultural memory. When a mother is separated from her exiled daughter, she becomes both fountain-head and symbol of the daughter's far away home country. So, for the exiled daughter on the path of self-discovery, the mother's stories function as road signs, historical record and personal recollection. She finds that she can breathe in the silences between her mother's tales, find shelter in the plots that have evolved with her through the decades, the truths that have been revealed slowly, with time. Her mother's stories flow fathoms deep, maturing as she does, whispering secrets (her secrets) back into her consciousness.

› *Folie À Plusieurs*

Folie À Plusieurs is a novella about stories, the women who tell them, and the women who listen. The mother/daughter relationship, with its push and pull, loosening and tightening of heartstrings, is at the centre of the plot. The story seeks to understand the influence of a mother's tales upon her daughter's memories and identity, while dramatising the dizzying nature of what it means to know

oneself. The path to self-discovery is a journey that requires both 'heroic will' and 'spiritual awakening' of all its travellers and *Folie À Plusieurs* is an attempt to portray a heroine's arc and to people the world with vibrant, complex, real women and the stories they tell. Storytelling, while a firm part of Ethiopian tradition is not often enough engaged with as another potential source of history, leading to a one-sided portrayal of history in favour of the elite. As James Quirin puts it:

The old Western view that 'history' required the existence of written documents...led to the [privileging of such sources despite]...Ethiopic written documents' centrist and elitist focus on the royal monarchy and Orthodox church [...] However, such sources, although a starting point for research on Ethiopian history, no longer seem adequate in themselves because they focus primarily on political-military and religious events concerning the monarchy and church [...] oral and local written traditions from the various [Ethiopian] peoples [...] can provide a partial corrective to the [...] biases of [...] written sources.³⁵

Folie À Plusieurs engages with that oral tradition by using its narrative structures and attempting to tap into its fluid and engaging nature. It simulates the digressions and cadences of speech, where pauses stutter and numerous interpretations complicate, the plot. The echoes of orality in the novella also work to downsize the fantastic scope of global history to human proportions easily understood despite the distances between individuals and between their respective cultures. It is a story told in the style of the Arabian Nights, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and so many others, where a myriad of voices join together to form the backdrop of one central journey. By complicating the tale with personal history, the strains of several disparate cultures, and magical occurrences I am engaging in a game of layering, concealing and revealing that challenges the elitist focus on and privileging of 'real' documents that the West has used to constitute Ethiopian history and identity. This composite method of narrative is also an attempt to illustrate reality as '...an infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments, each "shell" ... encased inside a nest of "shells" ...'.³⁶ *Folie À Plusieurs* translates as 'the madness of many', an allusion to society's pre-occupation with singular and simplistic notions in a world of infinite complexity. It is divided into four chapters, three of which represent a 'stereotyped' vision of a collective of cultures – the simplifying and un-nuanced gaze of the unknowledgeable outsider. I achieved this 'stereotyping' by convoluting the tales with trace elements of certain cultures, through the inclusion of choice myths and legends, historical

³⁵ Quirin, James. "Oral Traditions as Historical Sources in Ethiopia: The Case of the Beta Israel (Falasha)." *History in Africa* 20 (1993): 297-312.

³⁶ Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas* (London: Sceptre, 2004), 409.

events, and ancient philosophies to both lend believability and distinguish between my mother's profoundly impactful stories and those that I only glimpsed as a stranger. The one chapter that is dedicated to my mother's voice speaks most clearly, for those are the stories I know by heart. It is nuanced in a way that the others are not and marked with my personal recollections. Returning also to the subject and significance of names, they only appear within the chapter that speaks in my mother's voice – a decision that links also to the double meanings at the heart of Ethiopian wax and gold poetry, and the good intentions inherent in a parent's choice of name for their child. When the daughter is able to identify her mother's tales from the multitude of others she finds herself on a journey of rediscovery that leads her back to the country of her birth and to her mother's side.

Step Two: Nostalgia (Mother as Country and Country as Mother)

A daughter begins to see her mother and home country as one and the same and seeks to engage with the culture she has identified through her mother's stories as her own. “In search of my mother's garden,” Alice Walker once said “I found my own”³⁷, and in search of her mother's tales, the daughter finds herself. She has awoken in a sense, but she hesitates to commit herself to any society. After having spent so long on the outskirts as a stranger, she is afraid now to set her identity, to cast aside her masks or sever the many manifestations of her being. She is also afraid of rejection, to open oneself up to others is to risk that and more, and after all her shape-shifting arose all those years ago out of her natural desire for self-preservation. This moment is one of tension. This is where the decision is made. The daughter can make the leap, make the commitment. She can give of herself and risk getting nothing in return, or she can fold herself into stasis, struggling with a condition best described by the German word *weltschmerz*, meaning world-weariness that denotes the kind of feeling experienced by someone who understands that physical reality can never satisfy the demands of the mind.

› *Queens of Meroë*

The story is told through John Dalton's Diary, but the Diary itself is presented as a historical document prefaced by a noted academic. The Diary is a collage of rescued past mementoes, it is imbued with my country's culture. It makes use of the commonly utilised trope of the European hero on a journey of self-discovery in an 'exotic' place in order to call attention to issues of perspective, perception, and identity in a predominantly Eurocentric world. The *Queens of Meroë* is

³⁷ Walker, Alice. *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.

a rejection of the pervasive and ubiquitous post-colonial approach to African studies within academia and a reaffirmation of Ethiopia's long developed cultural sovereignty as a country that was never colonised. The novella carries echoes of British Victorian adventure stories, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but reasserts the Ethiopian as the teller of her own tales. The English protagonist John Dalton, though reminiscent of famous explorers such as Richard Burton, is a symbol of the often-times imagined authority of a Western specialist over a 'native' one. The *Queens of Meroë* also plays with the identity of the narrator as someone who is unreliable, as a figure which fades into the shadows and avoids description.

Step Three: Identity (Defining Ourselves by Otherness)

I argue that life is not easily classified into duelling extremes of black and white, rather it melds, flows, and coalesces in innumerable shades of grey – in the in-betweens, the cracks, the folds, and creases. In the mysteries and the unknown – both within us and without. “Étrangers à nous-mêmes,” Kristeva said, we are strangers to ourselves. She speaks of 'otherness' as a condition universally shared, of longing as belonging:

...the foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.³⁸

The final step of the exile's journey occurs when the daughter recommits to her mother and her home culture but realises that she is able to define herself within that context. That in the safe spaces of her culture, she can continue to shape-shift, but only if and when she chooses. She begins to 'define herself by otherness', in the sense that she acknowledges that she is many, that she is plural and complex. She has remembered the stories of her mother and returned to their source to gather her own, but she has brought the cadence of foreign tongues home with her. Those other selves she fostered dance beneath her skin. Realities converge, truths and falsehoods intertwine, her own memories of her childhood in her native country, the memories of her mother's stories and the new tales she has collected. She bridges the realities of many worlds, she is kind to strangers (being one herself from time to time), and exists in the grey spaces between things. In that way, a new culture is born, one of in-betweenness, one that is imagined and born in stories.

³⁸ Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Columbia University Press, 1991.

አርበኛ (Arbegna) is told through three letters, it speaks to the final realisation that the process of complication contracts with understanding, and through understanding oneself it is possible to understand the world and vice versa. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that “one's own self is well hidden from one's own self; of all mines of treasure, one's own is the last to be dug up”³⁹, and አርበኛ is that euphoric release when spade hits treasure chest, when the truth is unveiled through the tale. The series of letters symbolises a realisation, a redemption, an unbecoming to become. They serve as placeholders for hope, to speak for the future of multiplicity.

The End: My Country, My Mother, Myself

This thesis was born from a moment of crisis, when I struggled to locate myself and my identity within society and the world at large. Working through my research has led me to a personal epiphany and has granted me answers to questions that have plagued me all my life. I had initially expected to return to Ethiopia and find myself a stranger there also. I was surprised to learn that in Ethiopia, I was immediately recognized and accepted. Ethiopia, I should say, is a land of multiplicity. It is a country comprised of over eighty distinct ethnic groups and ninety languages, a nation of strangers. In Ethiopia, I could define myself, I could remain other, I could join the collective – the choice would always be mine to make, and the decision once made could easily be reversed. My mother's stories led me back to Ethiopia, in all my wanderings, they served to remind me of who I was – that is whomever I wanted to be.

My engagement with the world and its myriad stories does not end here, but I have realised that at this point in my life it is essential that I recommit myself to my home culture and to work to contribute to its manifold realities. This is not what I had expected to find, my initial mapping out of the exile's journey reflected my hypothesis that the third step would be one of disengagement and disintegration – a refusal to commit to any place or any culture, but this was not what I found in the end.

Looking back upon my initial research questions, I believe that through the intersection of creative writing, personal experience and critical research it is indeed possible to facilitate a productive conversation, inclusive of 'strangers', within discourses of diaspora. My thesis has been able to map the influence of maternal storytelling on the self-fashioning of the exiled daughter and that the Sem Inna Werq trilogy, as my ficto-autobiographical creative work, traces this influence

³⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Penguin, 2003.

through exercises in bricolage, orality and heteroglossia. As a whole, the texts add to our understanding of how life history and gender influence literary production, and delineate the nexus of fiction/biography/autobiography, both in terms of the individual writer negotiating the matrix of self and other, and in terms of the author in a wider social and historical context.

In conclusion, while I believe that my thesis has been successful in providing me with the answers I sought, it has only opened up a whole new world of stories to me. Returning to Stephen King's idea of storytelling as cultural archaeology, I have dug up only a corner of a great network of bones – the entirety of which will no doubt prove giant in scope and scale. I have decided to return to the site of my dig – to Ethiopia, to the source of my stories and my mother – in order to further my lines of enquiry and see just where this journey of stories will take me next.

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