

The

Zig

Zag

Path





By the same author

Poetry

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Swallows Return
Three Brontë Poems
Pirouette of Earth : a Novel in Verse
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Literary Criticism

Pilgrims from Loneliness : an Interpretation
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Regional

Yorkshire Lives & Landscapes

Acknowledgements

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For Bohuslav and Karen Barlow

The Zig Zag Path

Ian M. Emberson

Illustrated by the author

Dramatis Personae

Fasbar - the Great Ruler
Ruopa - an important statesman
Ioda - his daughter
Ura - Ioda's youngest sister
Bruntal - a shepherd
Amura - Bruntal's wife
Ve-me - a Heralot
Merot - a lawyer
Zat - a circus performer
Aubero - Zat's wife
Mura - Aubero's mother
Sev - son of Zat and Aubero
Pesurí - Sev's twin sister
Emís - son of Merot and Ioda
Besíro - Emís's twin sister
Dedo - a nobleman
Aco - a gardener
Elu - a servant girl
Fo-lo - a fisherman

Gods and Goddesses

Farshar - God of War
Zílwar - God of Revenge
Vila - Goddess of Justice
Cura - Goddess of Love
Deílo - Goddess of Comforting

Heavenly Bodies

Van-ra-mar - the central star
Un-ra - a moon
Leb-I-ta - a moon
Rín - a moon

Places

Zac-u-lot - the capital city
Opaxar - the great lake

*The scene : a planet somewhere in the universe, circling round
the great star Van-ra-mar - a planet on which life has
developed much as it is here.*

*Scene One : edge of high moorland - below is a green valley
with a lake and a mansion - leading down to the valley is a
zig zag path.*

Scene one

*Ioda stood
at the head
of the zig zag path,
looked up
at where her own great star Van-ra-mar
still hung in the cooling sky,
looked down
at the deep green valley
- the mansion
home of her father Ruopa
and all his family
- the lake
- the woodland
- her little world
- the only world she knew.*

*She tossed her auburn curls,
stretched her tall slim figure,
placed a slim young hand
against her pale wide forehead
and looked around.
All things seemed beautiful -
today
as on those many yesterdays.
The walk on the hills
had pleased her,
the prospect of home
was comforting,
this day
like many days before
was part of an unquestioning contentedness
which she had known from birth.*

*Yet somehow
she knew not why
a melancholy came upon her mind,
apprehensions - presentiments -*



it almost seemed
a thing quite tangible -
fragments of darkness
falling from above.

But no
this was illusion,
the sky was calm
her world was likewise still
- nothing to fear
how could she think such thoughts ?

She walked on down the zig zag path
entered the wood
and beyond that
(near to the walling
of the garden's boundary)
came to a minor lake
now lit by the warm glow of evening.
The sand around its shore
still warm from the heat of day,
the spot secluded,
the mood serene.

Ioda took off her clothes
waded through shallows -
then lay back and splashed
feeling such joy in life
as seldom she had felt before
- all melancholy lifted
- fragments of darkness vanished from the sky.

Yet scarce had she thought this thought
than she noticed a bird
perched on a tree,
between herself
and the great setting star.
The tree itself was bare
leafless and dead -
so strange surrounded by the leaves of Summer;
and the bird
- what was the bird ? -
a creature she had never seen before
- large - dark -
with crooked beak,
and curious evil eye,
strong talons,
black and glossy wings.

Ioda swam ashore
dried herself quickly

for already
everything felt chill,
got dressed
went on her way
now only wanting home,
mother - father
brothers - sisters
to dispel her fluctuating moods.

She came to a spot
where the path dipped down
and the trees thinned out.
Beyond she could see
the mansion just below
(yes - they were rich
powerful - well-known)
but her presentiments seemed all fulfilled
as she saw her youngest sister Ura
coming towards her weeping,
and something else she noticed
glimpsed between the trees
soldiers - blue uniforms - brilliant swords
close to the mansion.

"What's happened ?"
Ioda shouted
with Ura scarce in hearing.
"What is it ? -
why those soldiers ?"

"They have taken away
- taken away....."

"Taken what away ? -
answer me."

"Our father -
they have taken away our father."

"But when - and why ?"

"The why I cannot tell,
but when ? -
well - soon after you went off
walking the hills
there comes this knock
this rapping on the door
and father answers it.
Low voices are heard
no violence -

nothing like that,
and he comes back to us
trying for calm
yet somehow I knew
that inwardly he trembled.
'It's some misunderstanding',
that's what he said,
'Just questions needing answers',
nothing more.
And he returned to the door
went out
and that was all."

Ioda rushed to the house
- nothing was changed
yet everything was changed
- a strange contagion
hung over all,
as if a plague had struck,
or an evil God
had passed that way.
Brothers and sisters
mother and servants too
seemed stung with an unbelieving fear -
a void in the mind
which hadn't yet found utterance.

Ioda did not linger
but rushed off down the drive
feeling - if she were quick
all might be saved.
She turned at a bend
and there they were ahead
- the soldiers
and in their midst
the back of her father's head,
taller - reaching above them.
She ran round - overtook,
stood on a mound
close to the gate,
waited to watch them pass.

They came
all walked in solid mass
the walk of those
who trudge in paths
of predetermined duty.
None turned a head
though Ioda somehow knew
they sensed her there.
And she cried out :



"Father - father
- where are they taking you ?"
Above the crunch
of boots on gravel
they heard her voice,
and her father turned
looked at her
- nothing spoken
only a look which seemed to say :
"I will come to you
or you to me -
have no fear
- yes - it will come to pass".
And after that
they hustled him onto a wagon
and went away.
Ioda was left
standing on that green mound
scanning the distance.

*

That night
before retiring
Ioda stood at her window
watched Un-ra, Leb-i-ta and Rín
(the three sad moons)
climb slowly up the sky,
and the dark bats
fly round the stables.
A long time she stood there
murmuring
against the silence of her mind :
"They have taken him away
- they have taken him away".
Eventually she prayed
though to which of the Gods or Goddesses
it scarce seemed clear;
it was rather
to that sense within her soul
which linked her to the hills,
the star-warmed lake,
the circling bats,
the rising moons;
nor did she pray in words -
none passed her lips
none sounded in her mind,
it was rather a reaching out
from grief
her grief

from everybody's grief
to what might lie beyond.

Then finally - worn out
Ioda just lay down;
she did not think to sleep
yet sleeping somehow came
and held her in a trance
of suffering.

At midnight
she looked up,
a purple figure
stood beyond the bed
- close and yet distant.
the being had a warmth
like the great star Van-ra-mar,
a beauty
kindred to the three fair moons.

Was it male ? -
Was it female ? -
it had a grace
which gender did not touch.
Its arms stretched out
and at this gesture
a long and twisting pathway
sinuous as a snake
wound down to where Ioda lay:
on either side
horror and beauty mingled;
she saw grey cities
where people roamed
like panic-stricken ants;
she saw cool meadows
- flowers, and the heads of corn.
And somehow it seemed
the vision spoke
of a journey
she must undertake.

Ioda stretched her hands
towards that distant figure:

"Yes

I will go - I will go";
and she rose from her bed
and tottered forwards.



Scene two

Next day

dawning was fine no doubt:
world turned -
rays of Van-ra-mar
touched the air with light,
birds in the trees awoke -
twitterings - warblings - cooings;
snails slimed the paths,
dew touched the grass,
fox slunk to den
and bat to cave.

Ioda

scarce noticed this awakening,
but crept to the servant's door
quietly turned key in lock,
twisted the handle
pushed on the door
and she was out,
and home with all its comforts
lay behind her.


She crossed the gardens
walked by the fountains
with their many statues
of Gods and Goddesses:
of Farshar - God of War,
Zilwar - God of Revenge,
Vila - Goddess of Justice,
Cura - Goddess of Love
- and many more.

In her childhood
Ioda had lain flowers on their shrines
and sung glad songs to them,
and both in public
and in her private thoughts
had sent up many prayers
- her hopes and wishes.

Now as she passed
she looked in their mossy eyes
and wondered:
one alone
she lingered over
- Zilwar - God of Revenge,
she placed a finger on his forehead
- he was the only one she touched.

She passed from the gardens
walked towards the hills
and saw through greying mist
an antlered stag
coming towards her.
Ioda knew that stag,
and put her arms around its sepia neck
as if it were her lover,
stroked his flanks
fondled his massive antlers.
Then for a while
they walked on side by side,
came to a spot
where a stone wall
marked where the level of the valley floor
left off
and the steep rising hills began.
Here
she put her arms around him one last time,
then stepped away
held up her hand as if to say:
"No further
do not follow me",
and then walked on
- alone.

She climbed the hilly slopes
and high on the moorland's spur
came to the sheepfold.
Ioda must come here
to say farewell to Bruntal
her only lover.
She approached his hut
and sundry dogs ran out
frantically barking,
then came and snuffed her.
Bruntal stood further off
looking beyond
his back towards her.
Hearing the clamorous dogs
he turned
shouted abuse
at all their canine racket,
then ran towards her,
a grin
on his rounded weather-beaten face -
his sable hair all tousled;
flung his strong arms around her
pressed her close
against his knitted jerkin.



Both of an age
World had gone round Van-ra-mar seven times
since they were born;
childhood companions
despite all gaps
of social status,
no barriers seemed to lie between :
he was the only he Ioda wanted,
and she the only she of his desire,
and all around
strangely accepted their attachment.

Embraces first - then talk
- long endless talk,
whilst the wakeful sheep
bleated against the mist.
In a great rush Ioda blurted out
the events of yesterday:
her coming home
- the presentiments - the arrest
- the mystery of it all.
What was against him ? -
had he done something wrong ?
(But in Ioda's eyes
Father could do no evil.)
"Yet I must set out.
A vision came to me last night,
said, as clear as words,
there was a journey I must undertake.
How long ? - how far ? -
nothing is clear to me
yet I fear the way and the time
will be long,
but I must spend this day
just here with you.

Day passed in idleness
watching sheep
and hearing dogs
and seeing crumbling clouds
glide over seas of sky.
Sometimes they talked
mostly they were content
merely to be together.
Towards dusk
he took her to his hut

undressed her unresisting body
entered her gently
without haste.

All night they lay
thus in each other's arms,
but at first hint of dawn
Ioda slipped the embrace,
dressed and came out.

She blessed the hut
- blessed the young shepherd boy
who lay there sleeping,
prayed that the Gods and Goddesses
always protect him,
and with that thought
left this dear spot
and climbed across the curving slope.

Ioda paused
and watched the white mist clearing from the hills,
and as it cleared
saw the vast hinterland all spread before ;
forest lay far below
stretching for many leagues
of dusky green,
beyond that in a dip
Zac-u-lot
the mighty city
dwelling place of Faspar
sole ruler
of all this world.
Far over there
Opaxar
the lake
- more like an ocean.

Then letting her vision range
through rural lands and fields -
farms, hamlets, villages -
and there beyond
towering above them all
the long white mountain chain.
This was her journey's scope
- her challenge and her quest
- the seeking - the travelling
- her father - her father.

Scene three

As Ioda
descended from the hill
bleak moors gave way
- at first to scrub,
the stunted hawthorn
sprung from the rocky crevice,
- the lonely sycamore
- the gnomic oak
- more and more trees
till shadows closed around
- the forest
she was in the forest.

Here lay no path
except the one
which her own footsteps made,
and yet
she felt no fear
for somewhere way beyond
lay the great city - Zac-u-lot,
her father
he would be there
in some censorious prison,
she must reach him
- help him.


And then
Ioda had her faith
faith in the Gods and Goddesses
they would be with her
- nurture her
- protect her.

Tall trees stretched up around
bereft of branches on their lower flanks
spreading a verdant canopy
greenly above ;
and many birds were there
she heard their vibrant song
yet scarcely saw the birds themselves
merely a sudden glimpse
of blue, of green, of scarlet
and that was all.

Casting a lower glance
she saw great footprints in the mud
and newly-steaming dung
showing that some large beast
had recently passed by;
but of the beast itself
she saw no sign -
the only life that stirred
was the sleek movement
of some minor snakes,
whilst tiny rodents
trembled on the ground
- all else was shadow.

Then suddenly
Ioda felt herself to be alone
(no it was not fear
of snake - or some great beast)
her only dread
was of her own aloneness.
She stopped and prayed
to Deilo
Goddess of Comforting,
not kneeling on the ground
but pressing herself
against the massive trunk
of a tall tree,
stretching her hands
upwards against the bark
in supplication.
And in her mind
some being did appear :
two large blue eyes
looked downwards on her darkness
- a forehead wide
- a sweep of long blond hair
- a robe
blue as her eyes.
No murmur passed her lips
and yet Ioda knew
her prayer was granted.
She opened up her eyes
relaxed her clinging on that giant trunk.

Scarce had she finished praying
than fortunes eased,
her sense of loneliness
went to a mighty distance
- almost vanishing.
No sooner had it gone



*than something tangible usurped its place
hunger - just simple hunger,
and she looked round
to see what could assuage
her strong desire.*

*Ioda reached a stream
- saw on the other side
a troop of monkeys gambolling in the trees,
intrigued, she watched them build
a bridge with their own bodies,
then climb a coconut palm
up there above her head.
A sudden thought
came to her,
she flung some stones
up at the rioting troop,
and they in turn
hurled down the giant nuts
in kind revenge.
She broke them on a trunk
sucked out the milk
devoured the pallid flesh,
and thus refreshed
went back upon her way.*

*Towards evening
as shadows deepened,
Ioda noticed something move
high in the boughs.
Was it a monkey ? -
but monkeys came in packs*

and this was lone.
She watched it
followed it,
for there seemed something strange
about the creature.
Was it an ape ? -
or perhaps a being like herself ?
But for some reason
scarcely understood
she wandered on
keeping this something always in her sight.

Eventually the being stopped
and she stopped also.
Somehow Ioda sensed
the creature saw her
- looked at her.
It descended from the tree
swiftly - gracefully,
came through the shadowed gloom
towards her.

Ioda felt no fear
although the being was so strange -
small
(coming just above her waist)
female
(no mistaking that) ;
the hair blackish and long,
and lightly clothed
with rough and ragged dress
made from the fibres
of the wandering creepers.

It stopped
five paces off.
Then
the least expected of all things
the creature danced -
flinging wild limbs
in a most curious frenzy,
tossing her tangled hair,
and making all the while
odd inarticulate sounds.

Ioda thought of bees
dancing before the entrance to their hive,
each step
telling the swarm
the whereabouts of certain honeyed flowers.
It seemed a kindred dance,
or else maybe
the kind of show
a lyre bird enacts for its fair mate
- a luring on
- a message and a hope.

And at its end
the creature stretched a hand
towards her,
and without thought
Ioda took that hand
and at its touch
the jungled ways
appeared no longer pathless.
The creature turned
- walked on,
Ioda followed,
and for a while
they trod in silence
through the thickening dusk.
After a bit
they came to a tree of massive girth,
and yet with lower branches
easily climbed.
This they ascended
up to a platform
laid across the boughs.
The creature here laid down
Ioda lay beside her,
and with no apprehension
fell to slumber.

Scene four

Next morning
Ioda woke up first
looked at her still companion
and felt nothing but strange affection
for this small being
dark and curious.

They breakfasted
on fruit from near-by trees,
and then set out
Ioda in the rear
letting the other
guide her through the woods.
And as they walked
Ioda struggled in her thoughts
to find a name
for her companion.
Somehow she must be named
- must have
some sound
- some symbol in the mind
to represent her.
"Ve-me" - it came to her,
a nonsense word
and yet she clung to it,
for since the day of the arrest
all life seemed nonsense,
or perhaps the incoherence of a dream
vivid and real,
more real in many ways
than all the safe reality
of her long earlier years.

Now that she had a name
Ioda looked upon the creature
with freshened interest.
She wasn't dumb,
for when a bird
sung a shrill song
Ve-me would answer it
- echoing exactly each sharp note ;
and even a warthog
grunting in the scrub
drew from her kindred grunts
as if she had the gift
to speak to every beast
in its own tongue.

Ioda wished she had the words
to break the baleful silence,
and yet
as day progressed
communications passed
by sign and gesture
almost as clear
as all the tricks
which language can convey.

At about noon
they reached the river
(the one the monkeys crossed
with bridge of bodies)
they followed it
not merely for this day
but for some while.

It grew
- at first a minor stream
receiving tributaries on either side,
till it became a force
a mighty rushing
through the darkened trees.

And thus they walked the riverside by day
and slept at night
in some rough arbour
built amongst the trees.
Until one morning
the mist seemed strangely dense
touching their bodies with bright beads of dew,
and from afar
they heard a roaring sound
and saw great clouds of vapour
hung in air.

Ve-me turned aside
and from a steep descent
they saw the waterfall :
- a lion leaping from a precipice,
an ever-churning
ever-living being,
and at its crest
a tiny green green island,
whilst there on either side
great rocks and cliffs and crags
of pinkish hue
glanced through the haze.

So beautiful the sight
they sat there mesmerized,
and lingered at that spot
for half the day.

At dusk
they saw a sullen swarm of bats
rush from a cave
concealed beneath the tumbling water's lip -
thousands came out
darkening the sky
and shrilling the cool air
with whirling of their wings.
The sight
shook them from out their trance,
they went on down
but paused
by the gigantic pool
carved by the fall.

As they stood there
a shadowy form
moved from the rocks beyond -
an ancient man
his whitened beard
splashed on his brown and naked chest,
and all else bare -
his body
like a gnarled and wind-chaffed hawthorn,
and yet
despite it all
a certain youthfulness was in the stride
with which he crossed the slime of jagged rocks
and came towards them.

The hermit did not speak
but acted out for them a curious mime :
at first he turned towards the waterfall
lifted his hands
made gestures like a prayer,
and lowered his sinuous body
as in worship.

And then he turned
and faced the other way,
looking downstream
where the green valley flowed
to the Great City.

A look of hatred
filled his ancient eyes.
And now his hands

acted some hidden drama -
left against right
struggled in agony.

Finally
he hurled great stones,
and spat in anger
down towards the City.
His mime completed
the naked form grew dim -
slunk from before them
back amongst the shadows.

Ioda looked at Ve-me -
"What could it mean
this enigmatic play ? -
this acting out
of some unknown drama ?"
They could not know,
and yet Ioda felt
it chimed in closely
with her own presentiments.

They turned -
retreated from that place
and not until the thundering falls
had dimmed to nothingness
did they lie down
and seek refreshment
for the coming day.



Scene five

For several days
Ioda walked with Ve-me
the banks of that great river.
Then landscape changed -
slowly the jungle thinned
savannah took its place
the trees no longer clustered
but stood out here and there
in ones and twos.
And other life they saw :
the tall giraffe
stretched its long tongue
up to the topmost leaves ;
elephants grazed the sward -
came to the river
washed their massive flanks ;
and buffaloes in multitudinous herds
roamed through the grassy plains.

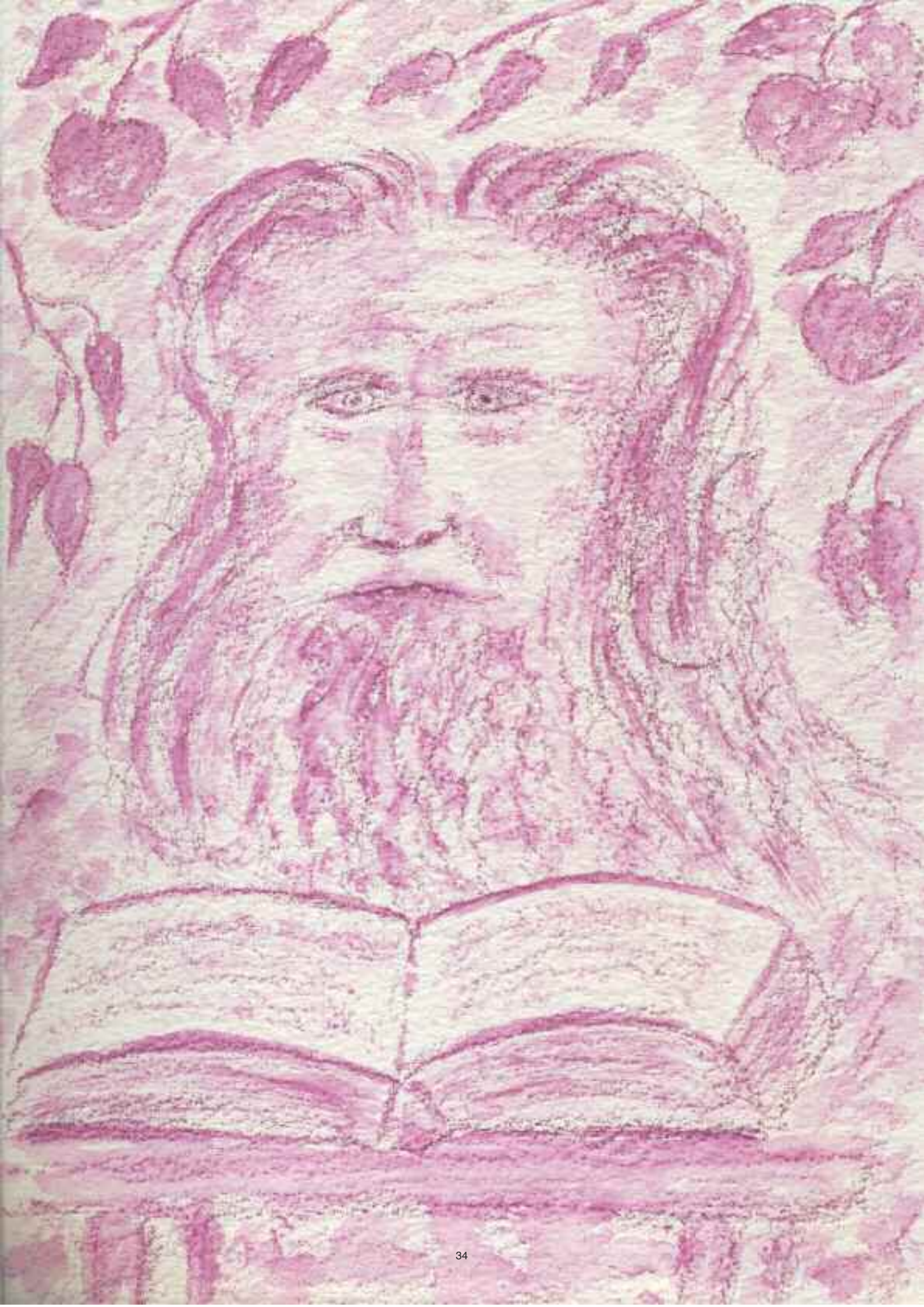
On seeing the buffalo herds
strong physical yearnings filled Ioda's thoughts -
how long since she had tasted meat ? -
how wearisome she found
the eternal dieting on nuts and fruit.

One day near dusk
they found a buffalo calf
trapped in a hollow.
Without one thought
Ioda flung a rock
which like a blade
cut through the creature's throat.

Next she collected wood
kindled a fire
cut up the flesh
roasted it on the flame
- gorged on the savoury meat.

There was enough left over,
but Ve-me kept aloof
gathered her fruits as usual
and ate them - sat apart.
Ioda took no notice
too pleased
to stuff her belly with the glorious food,
and thus content
she laid her down to sleep
and dream.





Scene six

*Ioda dremp -
she was in the orchard
back at home,
the time
that season of the year
when summer blurs forgetfully to autumn :
apples hung red ;
and berries all were plumped ;
the vine against the wall
drooped with its black black grapes ;
grasshoppers chirped below ;
and butterflies
- blue, red and green,
flitted their way from flower to flower.*

*In a clearing in the midst
her father sat
at a small table,
his beard and hair
much flecked with grey,
his wise kind eyes
looked at the holy book
spread out before him.*

*Their mother
sat aside in shadow,
and on the scythed grass
five brothers
and four sisters
lay and listened,
as with a steady voice
father read out
texts from the sacred work :*

*"Once
all universe lay
locked in a grain of sand ;
all space was there,
all time,
all that there was of embryonic mind
firmly imprisoned ;*

till
in the tiniest portion of a day
(though no sphere turned
to measure out the time)
all things increased.

Like twilight bats
issuing from black caves,
raindrops of vapour
trawled the darkened space :
nothing had shape or form -
just clouds
with none to see
to hear
to touch.

Then
splinters of atoms
rearranged themselves
- heavier and heavier :
energy came
and with its coming
LIGHT
quite suddenly burst forth.
Out of the blackened clouds
great fireballs grew
sending their radiance
across the seamless void ;
and tiny spheres formed also,
far far too small
to issue light themselves
but lit by stars
- warmed by the stars..."

The narrative went on :
- coming of life
- simple creatures
- the gaining of a strange complexity :
microbes - insects - frogs
snakes - birds and elephants ;
and then the coming of ourselves
- males - females
- the beauty of their forms.

Ioda lay on the grass
half taking in the word
but mostly
simply listening lovingly
to father's voice,
watching his face - his hair,
mesmerized
by the sounds that ventured forth.

And then she noticed
his eyes were under strain,
beyond his greying hair
all things were darkening ;
the rich fruit-laden boughs
no longer shone with colour,
and in the sky
black and ferocious clouds
crossed like a sullen troop ;
a sudden wind sprang up,
trees with their verdant leaves
writhed in sharp pain,
apples and plums
peaches and walnuts
all fell round her ;
lightening flashed,
and a tall oak
was split in two,
while rain cascaded down.

Ioda ran away
in wild confusion,
then realized
that now she was alone -
father - mother
- brothers - sisters
- everything gone -
only the curious storm
still throbbed around her.



Scene seven

Ioda awoke
in that wild state
when dream still seemed reality -
reality half a dream.
She looked around -
first thing to catch her eye
the carcas of the calf
clustered around
with jackals and hyenas;
she turned the other way -
realized with shock
Ve-me had gone away,
the imprint where her form had lain
still there,
but Ve-me herself ? -
no sign.

Ioda breakfasted on fruit
and then set off again -
empty - lonely - disconsolate.
The valley sloped
quite gently to begin with
then came to a spot
of sudden deepening.
She stopped
viewed the uncertain scene before her
with cold forboding.
A greyish pall
hung over everything,
and there was a smell
frightening and distasteful -
utterly unlike
the fresh pure air
she'd breathed from birth.

Somewhere beyond
tall towers
pierced through the mist -
the City - Zac-u-lot
the place to which she travelled
in patient hope -
in hope of justice.

But standing there
she felt no hope for anything
- just fear
- loneliness
- apprehension.

Ioda descended
down to the lower valley,
no animals here roamed free
but there were little fields
with wheat, barley and maize ;
orchards of plums and apples
- tiny farmsteads.

Eventually
even this greenery faded,
houses straggled
on either side the road,
and she knew from the smell and dimness
that she was underneath the pall.

Cars - lorries - rushed along,
factories vomited filth into the air,
and people - so many people ;
never before

had Ioda seen such crowds
swarming like locusts.

And as she walked
buildings loomed higher - higher,
and in the gathering dimness
beneath the guttering lamps
women with painted faces
and gaudy dresses
stood at intervals,
their breasts thrust forward
their legs apart.

Ioda viewed them
through sheltered innocent eyes -
she did not know,
she did not understand.

And yet she feared
- she feared so many things :
where would she spend the night ? -
here were no brushwood bowers
where she might lie
without so much as asking ;
and money ? -

she had no money,
a bed for the night,
a morsel of food
they all cost money.
She looked in the shops
wondering what she might do
till she came to a wigmaker
read with interest :
"Hair bought here
- good prices".
Yes
she had something to sell.
Without pause she entered
and at once
a woman grabbed some scissors
snipped at her auburn curls,
and they were wrapped
before her eyes,
and five copper coins
pressed in her hands.
Then on Ioda went
and stopped at a stall,
exchanged one copper coin
for bread and cakes,
sat on a wall
satisfied her hunger ;
next to the cheapest lodging house
- another coin
- a bed for the night.
The room was drab
she shared with twenty more,
yet she lay down
with gratitude,
thanked her kind Gods and Goddesses
and slept.

Scene eight

Two further days
those copper coins eked out ;
Ioda wandered
as a beast explores its plot,
scarce knowing
what she sought
or what she wished for.
Great streets were there,
the Palace
where the ruler Fasbar lived,
temples to every God and Goddess,
galleries
where lavish pictures
lined the rich walls.
She passed the courts,
passed the dark prisons too -
was he
was her own father
somewhere there
lonely - confined ?
Somehow she must find out -
but what to do ? -
she did not know
yet blindly sought
some key which could unlock the door.

Likewise aware
somehow she must survive -
but how ?
Money
- some way she must get money.
Ioda looked around
and one day passed
a tall academy.
A notice on the door :
"Models required
well paid".

*She went inside,
a kindly man received her.
"Yes - you are beautiful",
he said and smiled.
"But what about your hair ?"*

*"A wig-maker
- she cut it off".*

*"Well - it will grow again."
"What do I do ?"*

"You pose."

"Pose - is that all ?"

*"Yes - that is all
- come on
this way."*

*He led her to a door
pointed where just inside
there stood a screen.*

*"Your clothes
- take off your clothes."*

*She hesitated
just for a moment
then undressed
came out beyond the screen.*

*Ioda found herself
stood in a spacious room
- tall pillars
- ornate ceiling.
Gathered around
about ten men
a scattering of women too,
each artist with an easle
paints and brushes.
A couch stood in the midst,
the man she first had seen
arranged a pose*

- seemed anxious and concerned
for her own comfort,
sorted pillows
- asked if she felt relaxed.

Thus sorted
she lay quite still
- stared at the painted ceiling
where Gods and Goddesses
cavorted in the clouds.

It was so curious,
but then all normal life
had somehow ceased
that afternoon of the arrest.

She rested
felt strangely at her ease
and let her thoughts
wander and wander
over past events.

She pictured Ve-me
- where was she now ? -
and then what was she ? -
an animal ? -
a creature like herself ? -
or something in between ?
And how she wished
that she had Ve-me with her now.

So thus she dreamed
and time went by ;
a ticking clock
chimed as the moments fled
till posing ended.

Ioda raised herself,
then went behind the screen
- put on her clothes.

Before she left
ten further coins
were thrust into her hand.



Scene nine

Ioda
went to the Academy
each day,
lay back
tried to be calm
and thought of many things.
She sensed
that those who drew
considered her no person,
but rather
simply womanhood
- a body
for light to touch,
perspective to recede,
shadows to darken.
They spoke
kindly enough,
but seldom
even asked her name,
as if
exactly who she was
did not concern them.

But there was one
a man past middle years
- dapper - moustached
(not a professional artist
or so she sensed,
but one who came
for pure distraction).
He asked her name,
and when she gave it
smiled a significant smile.
What did it mean
that strange significant smile ?
She pondered long
but could not fathom it.

Days later
this self-same man
(Merot by name)
said he had something to discuss,
invited her
to come round to his house.

She went
not without apprehension
especially when she saw
the house loom up
grand and imposing.

"Here is a man of wealth", she thought,
"perhaps of influence".

She rang
a servant answered,
ushered her through some doors
into a lavish drawing room.

Merot appeared
treated her with respect
- showed her the house
- the garden
- took her to meet his wife,
then ordered wine
and they sat down
together on the sofa.

Merot lent forward
touched her on the knee :
"I know your father"
- the words were quietly spoken,
Ioda heard them with a shock of hope.

"My father ? -
what can you tell me of my father ?"

"He is in prison."

"I know - I know
- but what then
is he charged with ?"

"Treason."

"Treason ?
- how will it end ?"

"Death
- that is the penalty for treason."

"Is there no hope ?"

*"There is a little hope
let me explain.
I am a lawyer
I should have told you sooner."*

*"A lawyer ?
- can you defend my father ?"*

*"I can defend your father
- that is so."*

*"Recompense ? -
how can I pay you ? -
the Academy
- that is my only source."*

*"It is no matter,
all that can wait
till by-and-by."*

*"And hope
- what is this hope ?"*

*"A life's imprisonment
- better than death."*

*Ioda wondered if it was,
then asked :*

*"May he not then come off
- be proved an innocent man
- set free ?"*

*"I doubt it
he has too many enemies."*

*"Well tell me this,
do you yourself believe
my father is a virtuous man ?"*

*"Your father is a virtuous man
- yes - certainly.
Now - leave the rest to me."*

Scene ten

Ioda returned to her lodgings
buoyed up with hope -
her father was alive,
somewhere in this great city.
And now she had found this man
- this man of kindness,
anxious to help,
not asking for reward,
doing what he could
just for the sake of justice.

Death - execution
- too terrible to think of ;
imprisonment for life
that too was terrible
- all which there was on offer
lying beyond iron bars
and massive walls.
But it was better
(or so she thought)
for was there not some hope ? -
yes - she would fight for this
for anything there was.

*

The case came on - the day arrived,
Ioda walked
through vast unfeeling crowds
to that imposing court-house :
pillars towered at the entrance,
statues
which symbolized
all vices and all virtues
decked its sides.
She took her place
and looked around :
many were there
for was her father not a man of fame ?

Who they all were
Ioda did not know
- friends ? - enemies ? -
she scarce could guess,
yet she surmised
that as beside a watering hole in draught
hunter and hunted
waited there together.

And not just men
grouped round the place in awe,
their womenfolk likewise
crowded the seats
- dressed in all styles
as if it were a party
not a trial :
feathers of Birds of Paradise
swung from their wide-brimmed hats ;
stuffed robins, sparrows, larks
hung from the lavish folds
of sumptuous dresses ;
and perfumes
gleaned from lavenders and whales
scented the stuffy air.

Ioda heard a shuffling down below,
two guards came in
between them was the accused -
her heart beat fast,
since that long fateful afternoon
she had not seen him.
She glanced with fear -
was it he ?
The figure once so upright
now stooped low,
the grizzled vigorous hair
was now in places white,
the face
had on it a look
of suffering borne with fortitude,
his eyes were on the ground
- he did not see her
did he see anyone ? -
she could not tell.

The case began
- witnesses were called
- testimony was given :
her father had some friends
and many enemies
(this soon emerged)
defence went badly,
Ioda almost saw
the hangman's noose
dangling there - waiting.
Her finger-nails
delved in her palms,
sweat bathed her forehead
- she wiped it with a cloth,
and at that moment
drawn by the gesture
the man in the dock looked up :
despair marked all his features -
did he recognise her ? -
she was not sure ;
the glance reverted
eyes scanned the floor once more.

And then when all moved to one end
(or so it seemed)
up stood the lawyer Merot :
he had the power
to turn that mob of arguments
and now he used it :
each weakness in the case
he ridiculed,
poured sarcasm
on many feeble witnesses,
pointed out inconsistencies
which no one else had noticed ;
and then he took the strong points of defence
built upon each
until his eloquence
seemed to have swayed
all listeners to his views.

The court adjourned.
Ioda knew not what to do,
so stayed there in the great and empty court room
walking up and down -
she spoke to no-one,
felt only the rapid beating of her heart,
the gasping of her tense irregular breath.

They reassembled once again.
The judge came in
there was a strange communal gasp -
he was not dressed
in that sad sable garb
denoting death.
They all stood up,
he gave his verdict :
guilty
but with some cause for leniency,
the sentence -
life imprisonment.

Scene eleven

Ioda went out
into the fresh
- the hopeful air;
mingled with crowds
listened to what they said.

Some cursed
said that her father should have hanged
(she hated these)
others rejoiced
that he was still alive -
she looked at them
and wondered who they were,
was tempted to go up
and say to them:
"I am his daughter -
be my friend
as you have been to him".
But yet the barrier of shyness
the revealing of herself
to utter strangers
somehow thwarted her.

She felt a tap on the shoulder
Merot of course
who else ?
Ioda overflowed with gratitude,
kissed him full on the lips
as she had kissed
few men before ;
not caring
for the gawking of the crowd.

"A celebration -
there will be a little gathering
back at my home
and you must come."

*"Of course
how could I not ?
Who will be there ?"*

*"Supporters
those you have heard speak up
- defend your father's case."*

*The house was bustling
twenty or so were there
some whom Ioda recognized
those who'd defended
her father's innocence.
Others were strangers
at whom Ioda looked
most wonderingly :
who was that man
bearded - broad-browed
and with a kindly face,
and beside him
his wife - pallid and thin,
and all the rest.
Yet she did not go and speak,
but kept apart
- almost aloof.*

*Merot's wife presided
a woman whose beauty
long had faded,
but none-the-less
she ruled
- arranged the drinks
- sorted the seating plans.
Then one by one
the guests departed,
the wife likewise
made her apologies,
leaving Ioda
alone with Merot.*

Ioda was glad
for there were many things
she wished to ask him.
She sat there close
sipping wine
and putting question after question,
mainly about the thing
above all things
that she craved to know
- was there a chance of a reprieve ?
Merot held little hope,
yet did not totally despair
of such an outcome.
And then she asked about the trial
- the evidence
- so many things had puzzled her ;
and as she spoke
the lawyer fondled her.

At first she let him
out of gratitude,
but then became uneasy
- the hour was late
and they were quite alone.
She took his hand
and put it to one side.

"Do not presume on me
- you know my gratitude,
my thanks must be enough."

A look came in his eyes
she did not like
- sadistic - cruel.

"You little know
how much I want you."

*"Your wife is but upstairs
sleeping - or maybe not
- show some restraint
- show some good sense."*

*"I want you,"
he repeated vehemently.*

*"As your mistress ? -
no - that shall never be."*

"All right then..."

*At that moment
all consideration ended.*

*Brutally
he tied a napkin round her mouth
- she struggled
yet scarce could move her limbs
- the wine
- there was something in the wine,
how else was it
her usual strength was gone ?
Scarcely believing what was happening
Ioda felt him rip her clothes from off her,
and then the violation
the gross untender entering
where only one
had ever been before.
She tried to scream
- to fight against him,
but it was useless
her body
was no more at her command.*

*The cold fulfilment
hardly passed
and there was a sound of footsteps
- someone coming down the servant's stairs.
Merot got up at once
hastily fled.
Ioda raised her head
- saw one of the servant girls
walking towards her ;*

but the girl passed by
walked onwards through a door,
and down a passage
in deep sonambulance.

Even in her confusion
Ioda blessed the girl.
But there was no time to lose
- the napkin soon unwrapped,
her clothes flung on,
and then to the window
- a clamber down some ivy
and she was on the ground.

Without delay she fled
away from that vile house,
away from the whole vile city,
Ioda knew she had friends
- only a few short hours ago
and she'd been in their company,
but after this rape - this violation
all persons in that place
appeared like enemies
- her only longing was to get away.

She walked through darkened streets,
and when dawn came
and greyed the sky above,
she saw around
the sprawl of vast suburbia.
And still she walked
for she must place
as much of distance as she could
between herself
and all that city's soulless villainy.
She walked and walked
past fields and farms and villages
on through the morning
- through the heat of noon
- the drowsy afternoon
(when all else seemed at peace)
never stopping
for food, for drink, for rest.

Scene twelve

*Towards dusk
Ioda came
to the base of a little hill,
she climbed on upwards
and reached a stretch of heath
with sandy soil
where only scanty trees
and low earth-hugging shrubs
would grow.*

*It seemed deserted
and she felt safe
- as safe that is
as she could ever feel
in her uncertain world.*

*She found a spot
sheltered by crumbling rocks
and there laid down.
Despite her wretchedness
somehow she fell asleep
and dreamt...*

*Her dream-world
was a narrow rocky cleft
cut between towering rocks
- so narrow was the cleft
that there was scarcely room
for two to pass,
and yet*

*Ioda wandered on
sensing she had a mission
necessitating that she walk this way.*

*Far in the distance
she saw some figures
slowly enlarging
as they came towards her.*

And then with joy
wild recognition came
- her sister
- her sister Ura
- she was there in front.
Ioda broke into a run
stumbled on rocks and weeds
in her impatience to embrace her.
But then as Ura neared
she saw the young girl's eyes were on the ground,
she kept her pace
steady and fervorless,
did not look
into Ioda's eyes,
passed by
without a glint of recognition.
Her other sisters followed
again no glance,
likewise her brothers
and her mother too
- they all passed mindlessly
- passed by like shadows.

Finally father
- surely not from him
this sullen and unseeing stare.
She flung herself
down at his feet
- grabbed at his ankles,
and yet felt nothingness.
And at that moment
from towering crags above
a voice cried out :
"Do not seek him,
do not follow him,
he is an evil man
evil
evil
evil...."

Scene thirteen

- Awakening

- relief

- it was only a dream,
and yet reality
as it came slowly

brought her no comfort .

The first thing was the cold,
the sky was clear and empty
frost hung on the shrubs
around her lair.

And then the hardness

- the hardness of the rocky ground
on which she lay.

But worse than all of these
her total loneliness,
the horrid violation

which had driven her from those
she thought might be her friends;
and then her father
where was he ? -

alive maybe

but in some living death
caged in a dungeon
excluded from clean air
from nature - family - friends
- from all the things he loved.

Ioda looked up blankly
and little by little

saw other things than emptiness :
the stars

- how clear the sky
the great cool band of light
stretching

horizon to horizon

- the Dusty Path ;
and then the constellations :



the crocodile
circling the polar sky
with jaws outstretched ;
the elephant
the curving lights
forming the trunk ;
the rhinoceros
the bright star Vexos
on the sharp point of its horn.
And all the Gods and Goddesses were there :
- those oddities
the curious wandering stars :
Farshar - the God of War
as red as blood ;
Zilwar - God of Revenge
almost as red ;
Vila - Goddess of Justice
turquoise blue ;
and above all
Cura - Goddess of Love
brightest of all.

So - was she alone ? -
did Gods and Goddesses really dwell
somewhere out there ? -
surely they did
surely those tales from childhood's teaching
could not be lies ;
yet what did they do ? -
how could Vila and Cura shine so bright
on scenes of gross injustice
on violations
fuelled by lust - or hate.
How could it be ? -
she did not know.
And then she wondered
if somewhere in that darkness
on a strange world
laid on a little hill
there might be a creature
somewhat like herself
- suffering - suffering.

Scene fourteen

Despite all troubles
eventually she settled down and slept,
a long untroubled sleep
and did not wake
till the great star Van-ra-mar
was high up in the sky,
and all the world
active around her.

She saw a man and horse
ploughing an oblong field
far far below ;
and there were wagons on the road,
and people walking
- birds twittered in the trees,
or flapped dark wings
against the morning sky.

Here in the countryside
all life seemed better.
She gathered berries
breakfasted as best she could,
then down the hill
and onwards on her journey
- though what she sought
Ioda could not say
- merely a groping aim
to progress deeper
into that green world,
further and further
from that repulsive city.

She walked all day
passing green hills, green fields, green woods,
and little farms
hamlets and villages.
People here seemed relaxed
- no more those care-worn brows
the city-dwellers seemed to always wear,
here men and women laughed
sang at their work
shouted warm greetings
to one another
- even to her.

Towards evening
on the second day
Ioda came to a gentle valley
a village lay below,
and from the nearby field
the music of a fairground reached her ears :
roundabouts turned,
dancers and clowns cavorted,
children ran wild
and shrieked and cried
with sheer delight,
and in the midst
the white cloth of an ample tent.

Ioda
walked on towards the fair,
feeling that anything
which displaced memories of the city
was most welcome.
Here was a diversion
- a place where labouring men and women
forgot their toil and poverty for a day
and made wild merriment.

Conjurors
- they were there
doing their curious tricks
surrounded by a crowd,
clowns likewise
romped in wild buffoonery,
and animals wild and tame
paraded in their chains.
And boys and girls
wandered round hand in hand,
a custom she had heard of
whereby just at the fair
they acted as if wed
but for a day.

She looked at them
envied the passing joy
though it be brief,
and tried
to somehow enter in
the thoughts and feeling
of the folks she passed.

And then
just as she stood beside a tent
its flap blown open
by the breeze
she felt her being mesmerized
by a tiny scene.
Glimpsed through the flaps of cloth
she saw a woman
young and beautiful
sat on the ground
her form stripped to the waist ;
at her left side
a beautiful baby boy
sucked at her breast,
at right
a graceful girl
sucked likewise.
The mother herself
had an exquisite air
of gentle charm
- fine face
- fine limbs
with curving auburn hair
reaching the ground.
Ioda as she looked
saw in a trice
a mirror of herself,
and yet surmised
the look of sweet serenity
this woman showed
scarce matched
the weary gauntness of her own.
And yet the sight
seen in a fleeting glance
lingered and lingered in her memory.

Ioda wandered on,
past roundabouts
where tiny children cling to antelopes,
past jugglers, dancers, fire-eaters,
then sat on the grass
and watched a puppet show.

It seemed most curious fare
for childish entertainment :
tales of abandoned wives,
of lovers driven to their own destruction,
of incest - rape -
robbery and murder,
and yet the children laughed
- screamed with delight.

She then continued her meanderings
until Van-ra-mar set
and Un-ra and Leb-ita climbed the sky.

The air grew chill,
coldness and hunger
laid their claims on her -
where to get food ? -
and where to spend the night ?
She passed a yellow tent
where an old woman sat
stirring a pot
above a fire.

The woman's hair was white
her eyes a radiant blue
- perhaps a beauty in her youth.

Ioda stood and watched
- the smell of meat and herbs
torturing her nostrils.

Preparations finished
the woman filled two bowls
placed one before herself
and passed the other
to Ioda.

She knelt on the grass
tasted the food
just like an infant being weaned.

"You are hungry ?"

"Yes - very."

"Sit down beside me
- there is enough for both."



Ioda did as she was bidden
- sat down
- took up the bowl
- ate the delicious food.

The old woman finished first
- looked at Ioda
a penetrating stare
seeming to search
her inner soul.

Ioda returned the glance
slightly confused
she asked a question
the first that came to her.

"What is your name ?"

"My name is Mura
- it is an ancient name
and few have heard it."

There was a pause
a silence for some while
- then the old woman broke it :

"You search for something ?"

"A bed for the night."

"That wish is granted
- but beyond that
I think you search for something else ?"

"Yes - perhaps
- I search for many things ?"

"For many things ?
- do you not maybe
look for some special thing
or special person."

*"Yes - yes - I do
- above all things
I search for my father.
Yet - it is curious,
I speak to you as if you were my friend
- but really you are a stranger."*

*"No-one is a stranger.
Do we not live in the same world,
breath the same air,
look upward at the self-same sky ?"*

*"No doubt we do.
You are a wise wise woman."*

*"It may be so.
I have lived a long time,
and thought many thoughts.
But let us return to the question
- what do you search for beyond your father ?"*

*"For my own selfish self
I search for love."*

"And beyond that ?"

"Is there anything beyond love ?"

"There are many things."

"Tell me what they are."

*"A universe of feelings
lies out there
if we can break
the prison-bars of self."*





*"Maybe so.
I suppose beyond my father
I want to discover
those things he stands for in my mind,
and then I somehow want to fathom out
this everlasting mystery
- why are we here ? -
what are we doing
on this small world
for this short space of time ?"*

*"Each one of us
must find their own salvation
- their goal
- their destiny."*

"How long will it take ?"

*"A lifetime
and even then
we only get a glimmering.
But see
here is my daughter Aubero
and her husband Zat."*

*The couple entered.
Ioda knew the woman at a glance
- the mother of the twins ;
the man
struck her with more surprise
- his handsome form
and glittering costume,
and from his gleaming belt
there hung a knife.*

*As greetings were exchanged
Ioda slunk into the shadows
but listened with interest whilst the family talked
about the details of their daily life.*

*Zat spoke
of the happenings of his work
- of his performances
knife-throwing at an open box
in which his young wife stood
but lightly clad
and quite unguarded.
Spoke likewise
of a persistent fear
that one day he would miss his mark
- injure or kill
the person he loved most.*

At this Ioda suddenly came forward :

*“Throw knives at me,” she cried,
“I do not mind”.*

*They all looked with surprise
at the young girl with auburn hair
thus suddenly offering herself.
And yet
despite the strangeness of it all
it was agreed
that on the morrow
she would stand there in the box
just where Zat’s wife had stood before.*


Scene fifteen

And thus for each performance
Ioda stood in the box
but lightly clad,
while knives flashed past
and stabbed at the wood
on either side.
She wasn't frightened :
somehow she knew
the knives were not her enemies -
there were many things to fear,
but those sharp blades of polished steel
were not amongst them.

Life now had compensations
for Ioda felt
she had a family :
there was Aubero
- seeming like a mirror of herself
a mirror
but untouched with tarnishing ;
and Zat - the handsome husband
the man with whom she shared those daily risks ;
old Mura too
with whom she talked through many evening hours
- talked of her past
- her bygone childhood days
and all those things
which had occurred between.
Then - above all
the twins
- she doted on them both :
Sev - the fine boy
strong and active as a lion cub ;
and then Pesure
the lovely charming girl
- throughout her leisure times
she dandled them on her lap,
or watched with careful eye
their plays and frolics.

Yet there was fear
deep in Ioda's heart :
the big moon Un-ra
had waxed and waned these seven times
and the blood still hadn't come.
Could it be
she was with child
to the man she hated most ?
Why was this not
her Bruntal's child ?
Why had their many mateings not been blessed ?
What cruelty
that one vile ravishment
should lead to this.
Gods - Goddesses
where are you ?
Do you not look
on suffering womanhood ?

Often she wondered if she should confide
in someone else
- Aubero perhaps
or Zat,
or better still
Mura - the wise old woman.
One evening nearing dusk
she found old Mura
alone within the tent
- only a juggler stood nearby
but he was too absorbed
in throwing empty bottles in the air
to be of consequence.
Ioda went inside
spoke at first
of trivial thing
but soon the beldame guessed
that she had other matters on her mind.
"You have something to tell me daughter.
You did not come just now
to chatter on
about the boiling up of cabbage soup."



*"How do you read my mind so cleverly ?
But no - it should not cause surprise
- you've done the same
so many times before."*

*And thus
with little coaxing
Ioda told her tale
or most of it
for when she neared the end
- the truth about the life within her womb
she could not bear to say the words,
and burst out weeping
then fled from out the tent
and hid herself away.*


*Much time she spent
thinking of all the things
which pulled on her affections.
And yet despite these conflicts
a stronger force impelled her
almost against her will.*

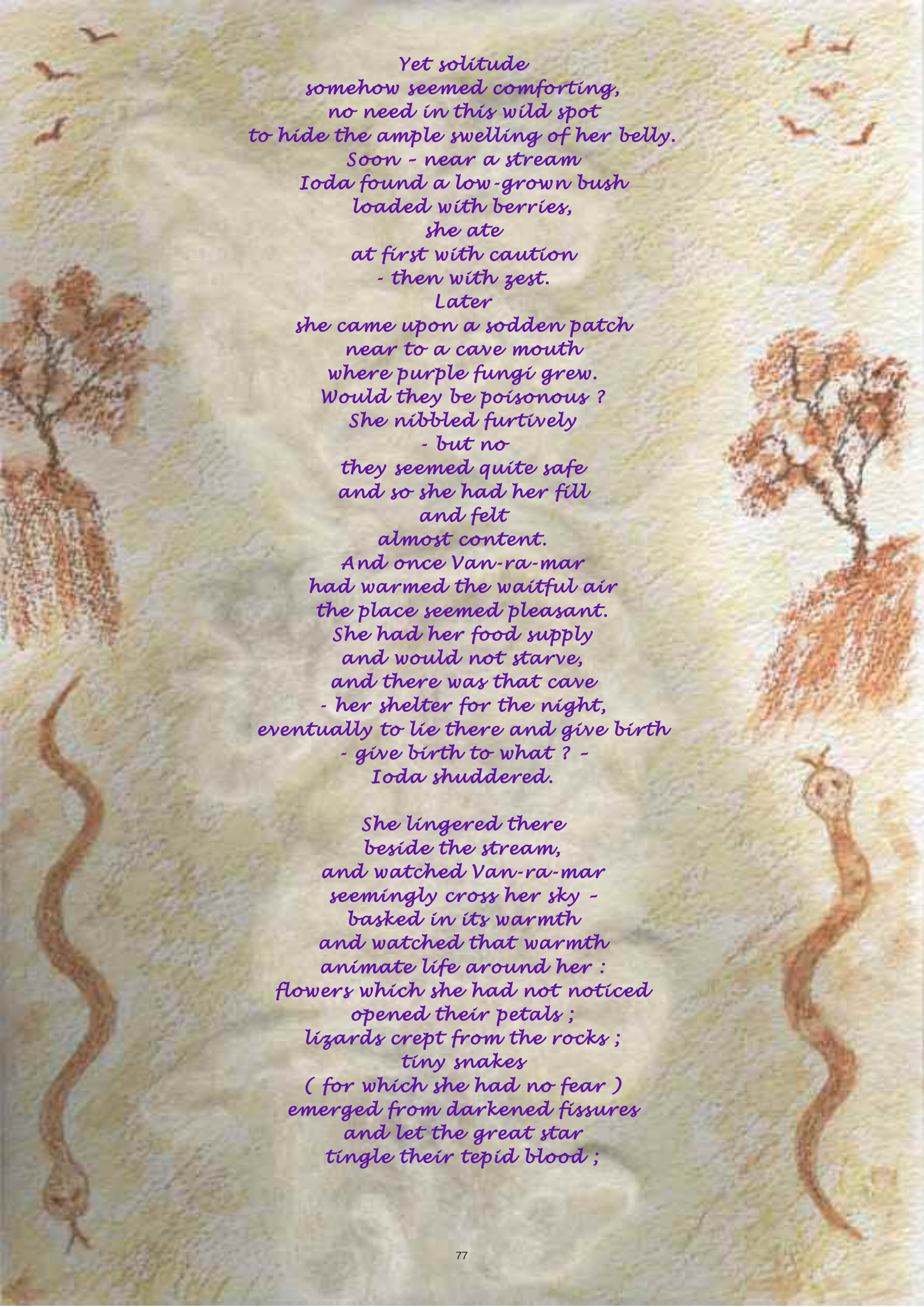
*Thus it was
that one dark night
without a word to anyone
Ioda crept from the tent
stole from the encampment
and went her way.*

*She wandered on
by footpaths lit by Leb-ita
- the only moon that shone.*

*The grey of dawn
as world turned into light
showed her a landscape
or low but rocky hills ;
gnarled scrubby trees
clung to their slopes,
and tumbling rivers roared
through shallow valleys.*

*There was no sign
of man - of woman,
the only life that stirred
was a great owl
with wide and silent wings
crossing the chilly sky.*



The background of the page is a textured, painterly illustration. It features two trees with brown and orange foliage on the left and right sides. Several small birds are flying in the sky. Two long, winding snakes are depicted on the left and right sides, one near the bottom and one near the top. The overall color palette is warm and earthy, with shades of yellow, brown, and orange.

Yet solitude
somehow seemed comforting,
no need in this wild spot
to hide the ample swelling of her belly.

Soon - near a stream
Ioda found a low-grown bush
loaded with berries,
she ate
at first with caution
- then with zest.

Later
she came upon a sodden patch
near to a cave mouth
where purple fungi grew.
Would they be poisonous ?
She nibbled furtively
- but no
they seemed quite safe
and so she had her fill
and felt
almost content.

And once Van-ra-mar
had warmed the waitful air
the place seemed pleasant.
She had her food supply
and would not starve,
and there was that cave
- her shelter for the night,
eventually to lie there and give birth
- give birth to what ? -
Ioda shuddered.

She lingered there
beside the stream,
and watched Van-ra-mar
seemingly cross her sky -
basked in its warmth
and watched that warmth
animate life around her :
flowers which she had not noticed
opened their petals ;
lizards crept from the rocks ;
tiny snakes
(for which she had no fear)
emerged from darkened fissures
and let the great star
tingle their tepid blood ;

bees came to the opening flowers,
and butterflies
of blue and scarlet hues
flapped their fine intricate wings
across the grassy banks.

Ioda did not stir
but stayed in the spot all day,
the place - no longer desolate
filled her with calm,
she plucked a fruit
whenever she felt hungry,
but mostly she merely lazed
watching the life around her.

Eventually
when world turned
and hid Van-ra-mar
behind the darkening rocks,
Ioda went to the cave
lay on some gathered bracken
and fell asleep.
After some while she woke -
the air was chill and dank
and suddenly a feeling came upon her
- she was alone ;
looking above
there were no stars - no moons,
only the roof on that small cave,
though if she turned
there was the cave-mouth
faintly lighted.
She rose to her knees
and prayed to Cura
- Goddess of Love,
and thus felt comforted.
Again she laid herself down
then saw through half-closed lids
a small dark form
standing at the entrance.
Ioda felt no fear
- no fear at all,
and watched the creature come
and lye beside her :
Ioda blessed her Goddess
and fell once more to sleeping.

Scene sixteen

Ioda felt no surprise
on waking with grey light
to see that Ve-me lay beside her.
She let the little creature wake herself,
and then they went together
down to that bush beside the stream
and gathered berries.

The whole long day
they rested at that spot,
occasionally getting up
and gathering food,
and without words
somehow communing.

Much time passed by
in this calm way.

Monotonous ? -

Ioda did not find it so
for every day she'd see
a butterfly of different hue,
a flower before unnoticed,
or hear a bird-song
novel to her ear ;
and each night in the cave
she and Ve-me
lay down and slept together.

Slowly

Ioda felt a wish
for words to pass between them :
gestures were not enough
- oh that she could converse
with this strange being
- learn her secrets
and confide her own.

Near to their favourite spot beside the stream
there stood a rock,
Ioda often pointed at it
shouted "rock - rock",
but Ve-me did not comprehend.

One day
she grew impatient,
took Ve-me's hand
stuck it against the hard hard surface
and shouted "rock"
right in her ear.

Suddenly Ve-me comprehended,
a curious guttural sound
came from her throat,
not the usual grunt
- there was a hint
the merest hint of "rock".
Ioda released her hand
but still the two of them
pounded the ragged stone
and shouted "rock",
till Ve-me's guttural sound
came out more clearly.

It was a word
- an actual word,
and at the realization
they embraced.

Other words followed :
"stream" and "bush" and "tree",
and linkings
and the power to transmit thought :
to spin out stories
from a distant time,
to speak of present things
and plans
spreading across wide boundless futures ;
to convey love and hate
feelings and wild ideas ;
above all to give names
names to all things around them.

Ioda pointed at herself,
murmured "Ioda",
then at Ve-me
uttered her name
which the small creature
innocently accepted
and used it always,
as if it were bestowed
at her first breathings of existence.

Eagerly Ioda asked
what Ve-me knew about her origins.
Yet Ve-me knew but little.
All that she understood
was that her mother was a vestige
of some forgotten tribe,
and that she gave birth
to this her only daughter
deep in the forest ;
taught her to scavenge,
and then
when she was scarce a child
the mother died
leaving the daughter
fending for herself.

"Are there others like you ?"
Ioda asked.

"Maybe - I do not know
- perhaps somewhere
in other forests
there live beings like me.
But if there are
I know nothing about them
- for friend I have only you."

Ioda in her thoughts
(but not out loud)
asked :
"What are you ? -
an animal ? -
a creature like myself ? -
or something in between ?"

*These questions
she left buried in her mind,
Ve-me's companionship
so needful for her life
must not be jepodized.*

*Then came that night
that inevitable night ;
throughout her mind
great waves of darkness
broke with a rush of pain.*

*She clung to Ve-me
drawing from her a strength
no other creature could have given.*

*And then
in the light of sunrise
she saw what she had borne :
twins - ugly twins
- a boy - a girl.
Ioda looked in their eyes
and hated them.*

Scene seventeen

*Ve-me and Ioda
nurtured the twins as best they might,
gave them names :*

*Emis - the boy
Besiro - the girl,
went through the outward show
of caring for them,
watched them emerge
from babies into infants,
saw them progress
in walking and in speech
as if all things were well.*

*When Ve-mi was around
Ioda acted a love she did not feel,
but when alone with them
she looked in their faces
saw Merot's features looking back at her
his lips - his cheeks - his eyes,
and felt an impulse
scarce controlled
to dash their brains against the nearest rock.*

*And yet
activities continued :
Van-ra-mar rose and set,
they gathered food,
they played - they rested,
all in itself seemed tranquil -
only the restlessness
which churned Ioda's mind
disturbed the peacefulness
- the pseudo-harmony.*

*World travelled round its star
for half a turn
and still they lingered,
and then
for reasons undefined
they started wandering.
A strange exotic group they made :
the mother - auburn-haired,
the ugly unbecoming twins she little cared for,
and that dark creature
small and odd.*

The village brats
hurled missiles as they passed,
and shouted curses
and obscenities.

Through countryside
small towns and villages they went,
earning what they could,
eating what they found,
sleeping just anywhere
- a barn - a hedge - a cave,
and thus they passed
long melancholy times.

One day at noon
they came upon a broad and verdant valley,
a river turned and twisted through its floor
and on its banks a town
beside which was a fair
and circus - with its many tents.

Ioda stood and looked
reminded of another valley
(seeming long ago)
- no - this was not the same,
but there was something
in the scene down there
familiar to her,
a tent - a yellow tent
could it be ?

The sighting came
as a strong linking up
of wild obsessions that had haunted her.

She knelt upon the grass
looked down
continued looking all that afternoon,
watched figures coming - going
was it ? - but no
how was that possible ?

For several days
she and Ve-me
lingered at that spot,
Ioda watched
concealed behind a bush,
and now
she could not doubt,

it was as she had thought.
And thus she noted
how each afternoon
Aubero took those beautiful twins
Sev - the boy
his sister Pesuri,
placed them in a play-pen
in the warm sunshine,
then she herself
laid down close by
and dozed till it was almost dusk.
Ioda watched
studied each tiny detail of the scene
- her plans were forming.

One early afternoon
leaving Ve-mí on the hillside
she took her twins
Emis and Besiro
(cramming their mouths with berries
to keep them quiet)
and crept towards the tent.
She lingered at the bush
verified that all was as she hoped,
and yes
there were the other twins
(the ones she covertly)
frolicking in their play-pen,
with Aubero
stretched by the tent-flap
fast asleep.

Ioda stole through the grass
with scarce a sound,
came to the play-pen,
hurridly placed her daughter in its rails
and lifted the beautiful boy
- lifted him in her arms.
Once he had trusted her,
but at this unexplained intrusion
he made a cry.
Aubero stirred
realized there was some threat
and called for Zat.
Ioda glanced one moment at the beautiful girl,
regretted deeply that she must be left,

then grabbed the boys
under each arm
and fled.
She made
not for the hillside whence she came
but for a clump of woodland.
She ran fast
then paused a moment
turned and looked behind,
Zat was in fast pursuit
and the knife was in his belt.

She ran again
then felt
a sharpness stabbing at her ankle,
she pulled the knife away
and flung it back,
it struck
she saw Zat fall
- the blood began to flow.

Her wound was minor
the shoe had taken the brunt,
and so she carried on
- on through the woodland
and then double-backed
and came to Ve-me
there on the steep hillside.
They carried on together
and by the dusk
had reached a narrow valley
clothed with ragged trees
and with dark boulders
tumbled in its depths.

As they lay down to sleep
Ioda almost wished
she hadn't taught the other how to speak.
The small dark creature
looked strangely in her eyes
then said:
"This day
you have done an evil thing".

On waking in the dawn
Ioda was but half-surprised
that Ve-me was no longer there.

Scene eighteen

Ioda looked long
at the vacant spot
where Ve-me last had rested.

Her words :

"This day
you have done an evil thing",
haunted her still.

She went through
all that had happened
- remembered the flung knife
and looked at her ankle
- the scar was scarce a scratch.
Zat could have killed her
- with his so certain aim
he could have reached her heart.
But even at that awful moment
he had aimed low,
intended to fell her to the ground
but not to kill her.

And what had she done ? -
turned round and flung the knife at him
with all the force she could command.

And something else
came backwards in her thoughts,
a thing

scarce noticed at the time -
a face
looking with snearing grin
from out the bushes
just at the moment of the theft -
the juggler -
that dreaded juggler -
may the gods and goddesses
protect her
lest he should juggle
with her fate.

She thought on all of this
and pondered
how odd it was
that she'd set out in life
fired with ideals
of what was right and good;

and yet
the inexplicable perversion
the evil in the world
- the evil in one's mind.
But then she looked at Sev
- the lovely boy
- the beautiful boy
and all else turned to nothingness.
She watched him sleeping
as a miser views
his most enamoured coin.
He was her's now
she would not let him go,
rather she'd die
than have him parted from her.

And then
the only real regret
to realize his exquisite sister
was not laid beside him
- instead that repulsive brat
she so much hated.
Ioda looked at Emis for a moment
- then averted her eyes
with strong revulsion,
and looked again at Sev -
bent over him,
kissed his wide forehead,
kissed his ruddy cheek,
gently and tenderly
fearful of waking him.

Day came
and on they went,
and so for many days
from place to place they wandered.
Ve-me she missed
for that strange being
was a link
to so much else.
Through her
in curious ways
Ioda felt in contact with all life :
animals, birds,
fishes, insects, everything ;

even the blades of grass,
the moons,
the stars which shone from far
they all were somehow there
in Ve-me's dark dark eyes.

Without her
Ioda felt alone,
some vital contact had gone out
and left her
to her solitary devices.

And yet
she struggled on
- for there was Sev
the beautiful boy.
At first he pined
- pined for the family
he had left behind,
and cried through half the night.

But gradually
Sev came to accept things,
and treated Ioda
as if she were his mother.
The two boys quarrelled endlessly
- fought over everything,
Ioda always taking
the fair one's side,
the mind of Emis
smouldered with hate and envy.

And thus life passed
day followed day
and in long sleepless nights
Ioda pondered many things.

And then one day
late in the afternoon
they came to a stretch of woodland.
Leaves were all gold around them
for it was that time
when world
in its journey round Van-ra-mar
began to dip their land
deeper in shadows.
The dormouse sought for sleep,
the shrews
lay in cold death
upon the pathways,

*the dawns and dusks crept closer,
and swallows and swifts
flew off to warmer lands.*

*A path appeared before them
broad and well-made,
and following it
they saw far in the distance
a stately mansion,
its chimney stacks
topping the highest trees.
The house was built of brick
and that dim reddish glow
sent Ioda's thoughts far back
to that great mansion
of her childhood days.
She thought of all the privileges
she'd then enjoyed,
and wished for their return
- not merely for herself
but for the lovely boy.*

*They came to a gateway,
beyond it on the path
an aged gardener
almost doubled up
swept the dead leaves
and put them in a cart.
Beside him a young boy
assisted in the work.
Acting on impulse
Ioda spread her hands
gathered an armful
- another and another
till the cart was full
- and somehow felt exhilarated
by this activity.*

*She turned to the boy :
"You don't mind do you
me helping you like this ?"*

*"Why - you work so hard
you'll put me out of a job,"
he joked
"But if it pleases you
just carry on."*

And then
a short while later
as she approached the cart
Ioda saw more clearly
into the old gardener's face.
A curious sense came over her,
a sense
as of a mystery revealed
for he was not a creature like herself
but small and dark and hairy,
squat - with a broadened forehead,
and massive arms.
And as she looked
a memory stirred
from distant childhood
of such a one as this
likewise a gardener
on her father's big estate.
Strange that this recollection
had not come back before
for with it came a thought
of far more potence
- Ve-me was not alone.

"Does he speak?"
Ioda asked the boy.

"He speaks a little."

"What is he?"

"A being - not like us.
Dedo - our master
keeps him out of kindness
- they call him Aco
- he answers to his name."

More questions
rose up quickly
in Ioda's mind,
but she thought best
to keep them for another time
and change the subject:

"I like this work -
will someone take me on?"

*"That's not for me to say,
you'd better see the overseer."*

"Where does he live ?"

*"In that house over there
overgrown with creepers."*

*Ioda went at once
and asked for work.*

*The overseer
was a thin and stooping man
with a suspicious gaze.*

*"Who are you ?"
he asked narrowly.*

"I am a widow."

"A widow eh ?"

"Yes - with two boys."

*He looked down quizzically
at Sev and Emis.*

*"Not much alike",
he muttered
partly to himself.
Then seemed to muse awhile
- turned back and said :
"All right
we'll give you a trial
- see how you do".*

*And so that garden
became Ioda's life.
As world travelled
around Van-ra-mar
she saw the seasons
with all their moods
- with all their flowers.
And she was happy
at least in most respects,
friendships were formed
though nothing deep,
yet even these were comfort.*

To be accepted
- this was her reassurance,
and then the work
the physical labour of the hands and arms
- the leaving off at dusk
the body weary
but the mind content
- this pleased her much.
And so time flowed
in a calm stream of being
and it might seem
that year would follow year
to her life's end
without much alteration.

But in the midnight's sleeplessness
memories would come
sometimes serene
when she thought back
to that big childhood mansion
(much like this
except that then
she was the master's daughter
- honoured - privileged,
then gardeners touched their forelocks as she passed
as she might do right now)
and then she thought of love
- of those long nights
clasped close in Bruntal's arms
- how safe she felt there
- how terribly secure.

But there were other thoughts
intruded much against her will :
the day of the arrest
that awful afternoon
when innocence ended
and all her pain began -
that sight of Ura
approaching her in grief,
and then the distant glimpse
of soldiers
- that shattering of bliss.
And other things led on -
Merot
- the building up of trust
and then the ravishment
the giving birth

to those vile creatures
who she loathed ;
how one thing led her on
on to another
in a course
that she seemed powerless to deflect :
the theft,
the flinging of the knife,
the sight of Zat
felled down in gushing blood
- and was he dead ? -
she feared -
she hoped he lived.
And all these thoughts
led always to one point -
her father
where was he ? -
and would she ever
be with him once again ?

Yet
after such nights
she would get up
go to the garden
touch the flowers
and smell their scents,
delve in the earth
with spade and fork,
and feel Van-ra-mar's rays
beat on her arms and shoulders,
and by mid-day
serenity would return to her once more.

One afternoon of dappled light
Ioda was working in the vinehouse,
when a man came through the door
- a man hitherto unknown,
oldish with greying hair
yet handsome in his own distinctive way.
He seemed somehow surprised
at seeing her -
looked at her strangely :

"You work here ?"

"That is so."

"How long ?"

*"World has gone round Van-ra-mar
exactly twice
since first I came."*

"I see."

*"You seem surprised.
But I'm afraid
I've no idea
who you might be."*

"Dedo - the master."

*"The master ! -
oh - I'm sorry
I did not realize...."*

*"There is nothing
- nothing to be sorry for -
its just
I cant explain the feeling
that I felt
when first I saw you."*

"What feeling ?"

*"It was as if
I'd known you before -
or something of you
- but may-be
you just remind me
of someone else.
But please
tell me your name."*

"Ioda."

*"Ioda
- it is a beautiful name
for a beautiful person.
You work at the vines often ?"*

*"Each day
while the harvest is on."*

"I will come back."

He kept his word
and scarce a day went by
without a visit.

Gradually
she learnt a little of his past -
once with his lovely wife
he'd played a part
both in society
and politics,
but since her death
he'd shunned the busy world,
spent many days
locked in his private room
seldom ventured
even out to his estate
and never touched the wider world.

Dedo's attentions
grew more intimate,
of course she knew what he desired,
but unlike many men she'd known
he wooed her gently - tenderly - with care
not to intrude until she was prepared
to grant him all his wishes.
He built for her a cottage
- she moved in,
it was a place
where they could be alone
to take their pleasures undisturbed.

And now
the negatives of life
no longer mattered :
the quarrelling of the boys ;
the gloomy memories ;
the secrets from the past.
Merely she basked
in this discovered adoration.
And did she love him ?
She trusted, worshipped, venerated him
- somehow it seemed enough
- she was content.

Scene nineteen

After the passing of another year
Dedo expressed the wish
to legalize their union.

Ioda agreed
- festivities were held,
and from that day
she found herself
the lady of the mansion.
Now servants treated her
much as they had in childhood,
but she cared little
for the pomp and show
and on fine days
would go amongst the flowers
pull out some weeds
and let Van-ra-mar's warmth
beat on her body
as in former years.

One morning
as she worked thus in the garden
she saw old Aco
weeding in a nearby plot.

Ioda noticed
how he kept his distance
- never came close
to where she worked herself.

Then at mid-morning
when it was time
for a short rest from labour,
Ioda went to the big house
and came back with a tray
- two cakes
- two drinks
just for herself
and Aco.


She sat down on a bench
and called him to come and join her.

He came
with shambling steps
as if reluctantly,
but none-the-less
sat down beside her
accepted from her hands
the cake - the drink.

*She tried to have some talk
but soon gave up,
his words seemed limited
to his own name
and various grunts
which passed for "please" and "thank you".
And yet
she felt there was communication
though how conveyed
Ioda could not tell.
When they had finished
their small snack,
she looked for a moment
into his sad and ancient eyes
and somehow felt
(as she had felt with Ve-me)
that they were a passageway
to something else -
a wisdom
not vouchsafed to such as she
- a communion
with the eternal
with all things.
And then he turned away
his weary eyes.
Ioda picked up the mugs
and went back to the house.*

*Despite the intimacies
of married life
there were so many things
Ioda had not talked about to Dedo.
Some filled her mind with shame
- she dreaded
he might light upon
those hidden secrets.
But there were also questions
she herself longed to ask
and only waited
for a chance to ask them.*

*One evening
they sat by the ample fire
within the living room,
protected from the chill*



- for out beyond
were all the signs
that World was dipped
into its deepest shadow.

Out on those distant hills
the mountains hares were white
the stoats transformed to ermines
and Van-ra-mar
which scarce seemed fully risen
was already setting.

Dedo
seemed in a relaxed
and tranquil mood ;
the fire burned bright,
and Aminer
their favourite dog
stretched his long glossy body
before the glow.

A knock came to the door
and Aco entered
with a load of logs,
he dropped them by the grate -
Ioda granted him
not just a word of thanks
- a smile as well.
He did not speak
but to his wrinkled face
there came a curious look of gratitude.

He left.
Ioda wandered to the window,
and watched his shrunken form
trudge off amidst the snowy dusk,
and did not let the curtain fall
till he was out of sight.
Then she turned to Dedo :

"My first glimpse of your estate
- Aco - gathering the leaves
I'll never forget it."

"You thought him strange ?"

"Yes
- but not completely so."

"How come ?"

*"Well
when first I saw him
a recollection came
from earliest childhood
- an old gardener
on my father's land."*

"And that is all ?"

*"No
far from all
for there was Ve-me."*

"Who is Ve-me ?"

*"A female being
somehow akin to Aco."*

"And how do you know this Ve-me ?"

*"She comes into my life
stays for a while
then leaves."*

*There was something in her voice
made Dedo realize
that she was half-reluctant
to discuss this.
He let the subject drop,
but she herself
reintroduced it :*

*"Ve-me - Aco
what are they ? -
do you know ?"*

*"Yes,
they are members of a group of beings
the Heralots
- creatures like us
- yet not like us."*

"How is this so ?"

*"Well
they have their ways
somewhat akin to ours,*

but as you see
they're small and dark and hairy,
in some ways
they are rough and crude,
yet if one takes the time
you find an uncanny wisdom
deep within."

"Are there many ?"

"Yes - thousands."

"And where do they live ?"

"There are scattered remnants
here and there,
but mostly they abide
on a big island
in the great lake Opaxar
- have you seen the great lake ?"

"Yes
from afar."

"It is bigger
than many seas,
and their island
as large as a small country."

"Do people visit them ?"

"Very seldom.
Most see them as a threat.
The Great Ruler - Fasbar
has long wished
to wipe them out
exterminate the lot,
but then your father....."

"My father ?"

Ioda gasped.
For long
two mysteries
had puzzled her :
Ve-me
her people
what they were ? -

and her father
why the arrest ? -
the imprisonment.
Despite the trial
Ioda sensed
something remained unsaid.
And now
as in a trice
she saw the separate puzzles
were somehow intertwined
- the clues
led to the one solution.

"My father
- you said 'My father'
what do you know
about my father ?"

"You remember
that first warm afternoon
I saw you in the vinehouse ?"

"Of course."

"Perhaps you recollect
a startled feeling
showing in my face
when first I saw you."

"I do recall it."

"That too was a memory
going back long years.
You reminded me
of Ruopa - your father,
you have the same broad forehead
the self-same violet eyes."

"You were astute
to recognize the likeness."

"I knew your father well
when he was young
as you are now.
You truly are his daughter
not just in looks
in character as well -

*the same determination
- the striving after right."*

*"Yes - yes -
but how does this tie up
with Ve-me - Aco -
the people on the island ?"*



*"Bear with me patiently
and I'll explain.
Your father
- picture him when young
- gifted - handsome - clever
- he became a favourite
with Fasbar - the Great Ruler,
but then they quarrelled."*

"What about ?"



*"Why - the creatures on the island
- the Heralots.
Fasbar (as I said)
thought them a threat
wanted to finish them
make them extinct
like those strange monsters
who once roamed this world."*

*"My father
he opposed him ? -
I know instinctively
that he was right,
but tell me
what reasons did he give ?"*

*"Dear girl
all living things are sacred,
listen
do you not hear
those crickets in the brickwork
chirping
at the glowing of the fire ?
They are our brothers and our sisters
- through them
and through the love we bear each other
we make contact
with every living being."*



And if
beyond this little world of ours
on other worlds
specking the fields of stars
creatures somewhat like us
exist and think and breath,
through love
we are in contact with them too."





"It is a solemn thought.
But tell me
this conflict with the Great Ruler
- what happened them ?"

"You know what happened
- the arrest - imprisonment.
Of course
there was the trial
with all its show of fairness.
But all the charges were a sham,
even the defence
was trumpery."

"But he was saved."

"Saved ? -
yes in a fashion.
I do not think the Mighty Ruler cares much
that he did not hang,
the great thing is
he's silenced.
There in the prison cell
he cannot sway opinion with his words."



"But is there no hope
- no hope
that there may come reprieve ?
Tell me quite true
is there no hope ?"

"I think there is
a very little hope."

"What is it ?"

"That you
go to the Mighty Ruler
and plead with him."



"Will you come with me ?"

*"No - that would never do.
If you drove up
with me beside you in a carriage
that would make no show."*

"How shall I go ?"

*"You must walk
- arrive worn out
your clothes in tatters
- that might make an impact."*

*"You think so ?
But surely even then
Fasbar would not release him.
You said yourself
the wish behind it
is to silence him.
But if released
my father would oppose him once again
- will he be granted freedom
knowing that ?"*

*"Yes
there will be a price to pay
before release.
Your father will be made swear an oath
never to speak these thoughts again.
Continued silence
that is the price to pay."*

"You think so ?"

"That is what I think."

*"Well
if that is so
I will attempt it."*

"It is a slender chance."

*"Slender or not
I will attempt it."*

Scene twenty

Ioda had a yen
to sally forth that very night
or else next day,
so great her wish
to clutch at any hope
for her father's freedom.

Dedo restrained her.
Not until
the last white drift
had vanished from the hills
would he permit it.
And then
in the first flush of spring
she left
without a word to anyone
except for Sev and Dedo.

It was a return
to distant times of wandering.
She thought it
almost a relief
to walk the soggy roads
through springtime rain,
to watch the rainbows
bloom and shine and fade,
and hear the quivering larks
sing in their glory
over lonely moors.

But as the days went by
she felt less sure
- less sanguine of her mission.
Doubts came to her
which she tried hard to banish,
but still they came
to haunt the sleepless nights.

One hot mid-day
when Ioda felt
the City looming closer,
she overtook a woman and two children
- a donkey and a cart
following behind.
She had a need for company
and lingered
till the woman drew abreast
then fell into a casual conversation.

Ioda told her
of her mission to the Great Ruler
and of what she hoped to gain.
The woman's hard
and weather-beaten face
remained impassive.

"There will be a price to pay",
she said at last.

"Yes
- so my husband said,
a promise from my father
to enter politics
never again."

"Oh no !
I was thinking
of a very different price.
All you need to do
is lie on your back
with your legs open
- that's the only coin
that interests him,
and judging by the look of you
the bribe might work."

Ioda fell silent
filled with emptiness,
the hopes for her father
which Dedo had fed to her
seemed now but nebulous idealism
in no way linked
with the cruel callous world.

*"Do I speak too plainly ?"
the woman asked.*

*"Perhaps
- but I fear you speak the truth."*

*"Of course
I only speak from hearsay
- I was a plain girl
before I turned ugly
- great rulers don't desire the likes of me
even as harlots."*

*She gave a bitter laugh.
Then plucked a berry
from a nearby bush,
chewed it
and spat out the pips.*

*"That's how men treat women
- suck up the goodness
and spit out the rest."*

*Ioda did not reply
but merely looked
in the woman's bitter face,
then at the ragged brats
and the half-starved donkey
and gave a sigh.*

*In silence they carried on
till their ways parted,
Ioda watched them disappear
with deep relief.*





Scene twenty one

Ioda came to the brow of a hill
and paused,
for there in the far distance
lay Zac-u-lot
- the Mighty City.

Once
long ago
she had paused likewise
at her first view of it,
but that half-forgotten moment
of fear and apprehension
was as nothing
to what she felt right now,
for since that time she had learnt so much
of the cold world's unfeeling cruelty.
And yet she stood there long
picking out
the tallest buildings :
the palaces, the temples,
the courts of law,
the prisons
- yes
- she had seen them all
and knew too well
exactly what they stood for,
and felt herself
as powerless as a lamb
approaching a lion's lair.

But yet she wandered on
past the last fields and farms
where green and countryside
expired together,
and entered suburbs
- trudged through the weary streets.
Ioda almost wished
she wore disguise,
for there were those
she had no wish to meet.
Yet no-one recognized her
- though some there were
who stood and stared
at her tall figure
and her ragged clothes.

She took some lodgings
poor and unpretentious
which none-the-less
looked over a small valley
and there beyond
Great Fasbar's Palace.
It seemed appropriate
that from her humble window
she looked at her objective.
And yet
she made no move
- faltered - hesitated.

Sometimes she walked
round by the Palace gates,
watched sentries strut and stride,
observed
the various comings - goings,
looked up
at the façade
- the lengthy colonnade
- the rows and rows of quite uncountable windows
- merely studied and thought
- and came away.

Eventually
this walking turned more general,
for whole long days
she trudged the city streets
though what she sought
or what she hoped to gain
she could not say.

And yet
little by little
she did derive some clues
which seemed of use.
She learnt the city's mood
through snippets overheard
and daily observations ;
she listened in
as groups in furtive bands
discussed the times ;
realized full well
the people's minds
were seething with rebellion.
Once she beheld
a larger crowd
heard speeches
read the placards

gauged the tone
sensed the hatred which boiled up
against the Mighty Ruler.
And yet Ioda sensed as well
the counter-forces that were building up
against this mood :
the soldiers in the streets
- the squares - the parks ;
the same blue uniforms
which she remembered well
from that most terrible of afternoons.
She also thought
of other agents who must be around :
the spying eyes,
the informants listening in -
forewarnings
of the fight which lay ahead.

And so
Ioda still looked out
- looked from her lodging's window
at that vast Palace
seat of Fasbar's power,
thought about Dedo's words,
and also what that cynical woman said :
"Lie on your back with your legs open
it's the only coin he knows".

Still
she made no move
feeling the best course
was merely to bide her time
- see if the tumult of event
would of itself
lead her towards her goal.

One day
after much wandering
she came to a place
of narrow twisting ginnels
flanked on each side
by ancient houses.
The area seemed crowded
as if a hive of bees
had swarmed just there
by some communal instinct
- young and old
- rich and poor
were there foregathered.

Ioda
scarce had time
to take this in
before the mob was surging.
She had no choice
with or without her wishing
she was forced forward
down the narrow lanes.

It was a flood,
and from the alleyways on either side
the tributaries
joined with the roaring tumult.

Little was said
and yet a murmur
passed across the crowd :
"To the Palace
- to the Palace".

They surged towards their goal
yet not without some conflict on the way,
some soldiers fled
but others stood their ground
- held out

but only for a while.
The mob was in that mood
where all authority seemed decent game ;
Ioda watched with horror
as an ancient priest
was dragged from his temple
- his venerable head
battered against the railings
till the blood flowed down.

She turned away
having no heart
for mindless cruelty,
one thought alone
held sway upon her mind
- her father
where in this chaos was her father ?

They came to the Palace
but here halted.
Soldiers in thousands
stood in serried ranks
- even the mob
with all its wild ferocity
paused at the sight,
and both sides eyed each other
across the desolate square.

And then a whisper
spread from group to group :
"To the prison - to the prison."
And like a shoal of fish
the whole crowd turned,
leaving the Palace Square to emptiness
- thus they carried on
- to the prison - to the prison.

Here too they paused
but not for long,
the prison was but ill defended
- a scattering of soldiers
who soon fled,
but none-the-less
the doorway seemed formidable enough.

Ioda looked across
and saw from iron-grilled windows
fragments of cloth
being fluttered in the air
as those encased within
sent greetings to their friends below.
And words were shouted too
encouragement
"Come on - come on - come on".

Ioda looked
and wondered where in those grim battlements
her father lay encased.

Then from a nearby street
she saw an antique canon
dragged by the crowd,
it looked so old and strange
she wondered if it were
some quaint museum's loot.
No matter
it was enough
- some powder and some shot
a sudden blast
and down the gateway crashed,
another blast
and a great cave
showed in the prison walls,
a motley bunch of warders
put up some feeble playing at a fight
then like the soldiers fled.

Chaos broke out
- besiegers rushing in
the prisoners rushing out
and round the entrance
it almost seemed
they were in conflict
- the rush for freedom
- the craving for revenge.

Ioda climbed on a low stone wall
to watch the scene
- one face she sought,
if she should see him
she was resolved
to fight her way
right through the churning crowd
- anything
to be once more beside him.
There he is...
but no - no
- some other man
- older - more stooping.
Several times
her hopes were raised
yet at that distance
she never could be sure.

The euphoria of conquest was short lived,
from afar
they heard the heavy tramping of the horses :

"The army is coming !"

As before
news spread like a contagion,
yet scarce had time
before the enemy
was there before them.
A volley of shots rang out
- hundreds lay twisting
in their flowing blood.
Ioda had no wish to die,
she clambered from the wall
- joined in the rushing stream,
which in retreat
gushed even faster than before.

Scene twenty two

For quite some while
with or against her will
Ioda was borne on
through city streets
then through a sprawl
of non-descript suburbia.

Eventually the mood relaxed
- no signs remained
of soldiers in pursuit,
and at the earliest moment
she went off
- found her own way.

Somehow she felt secure
in isolation,
although the landscapes
through which she passed
were unfamiliar.

After some days
she came to a great marsh
- the pathways scarce above
the level of small pools and scattered lakes.

Everywhere around
were reeds and rushes
whilst grey and silent mists
haunted the scene.

She did not like the place
but from necessity
selected out the highest bit of ground
and made her camp
- lay down to rest,
and through her semi-sleep
listened to croaking frogs
and the lapping of small waves.

Next day
she saw low hills
some way beyond,
and nearer to
heard tinkling bells
and watched great flocks of sheep
and shepherds with their dogs.

A tiny village
lay in the dip
of two small hills,
and when she came to it

she rested by a cottage
glad to subdue her weariness.

After some while
a girl came from the cottage
invited Ioda in
and gave her food and drink.
Her hunger eased
she lay back in a chair
and fell asleep.
She must have lain some while
for when she woke
supper was on the table,
a man stood by the fire
in garments of rough wool
his face turned from her,
whilst two small boys
romped on the hearth.

The girl approached Ioda :

"You had a sleep
- that's good,
now - when you're ready
you must join us in a meal,
and don't go any further
sleep the night with us."

Ioda felt relieved
yet something troubled her.
But then
the girl went from the room
the man turned round
and looked at her.
She gave a start
- those features
once so dear to her,
those heavy arms
in whose embrace
she'd lain for many a night
- Bruntal - it was he
- changed
and yet recognizable.

But no great scene
of mutual recognition
seemed appropriate.

He looked at her
- wordlessly
but with an expression
which spoke one word
and one word only :
"silence".

Ioda understood,
the girl returned,
Ioda closed her eyes
- pretended she was still
but half-awake,
whilst her emotions churned
and she fought fiercely
to control them.

She stayed that night
another and another
- struck up a strange accord
with Ruama
Bruntal's young wife.

In daytime
when he was with the sheep
Ioda watched her spin the wool
wanted to help
and she herself
learnt all the kindred crafts
which turned the woolly fleece
to warm soft clothing.

Ioda lingered on
she felt a terrible reluctance
to return.

Returning in triumph
with her father
- that would be different,
but coming as she was
somehow a failure
this she could not face,
and then the problems
- the two boys
and their endless quarrels.

She longed for Sev
- just to be with him only,
but then there was the other
and even Dedo

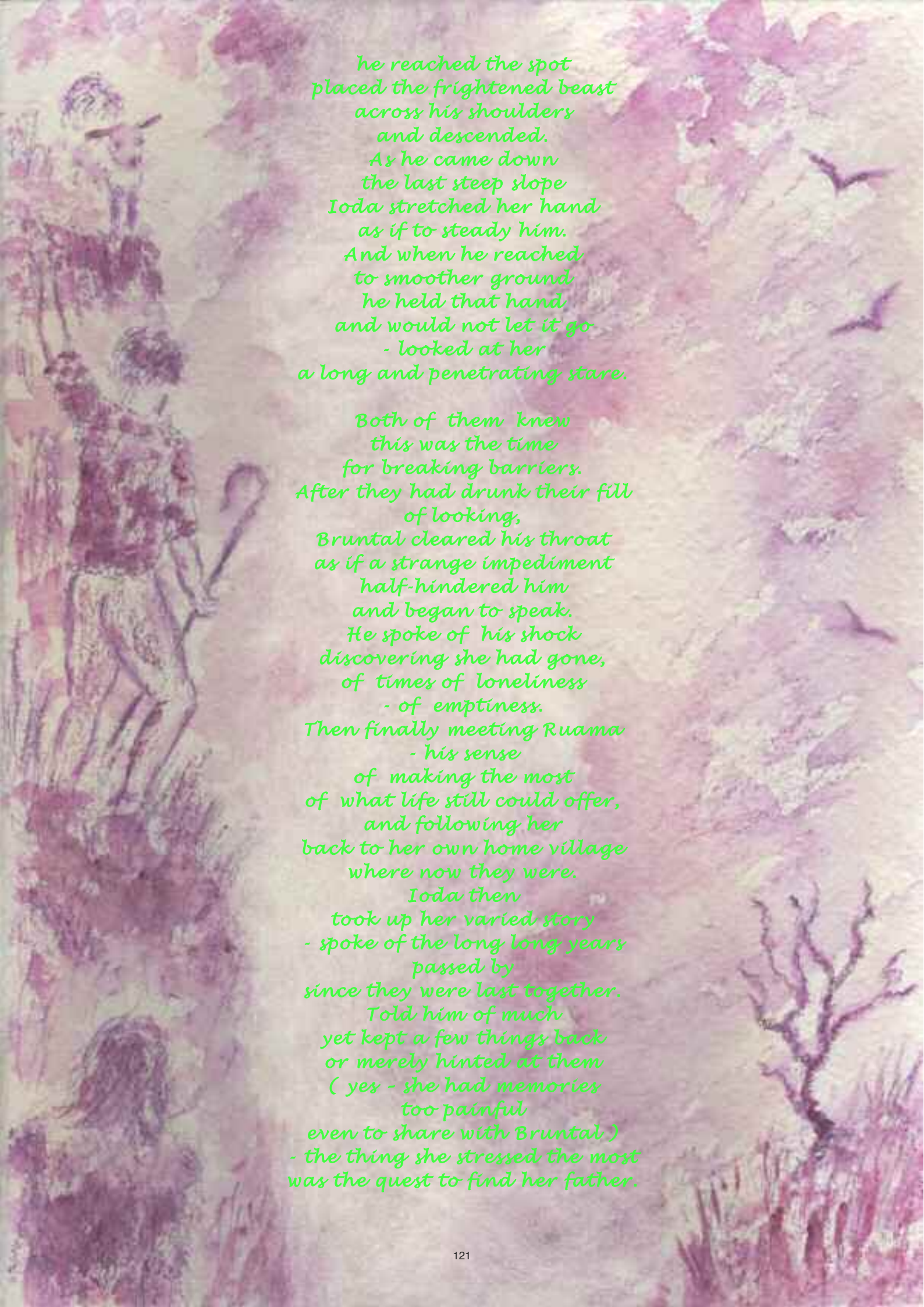
(kind man that he was)
she could not quite say why,
and yet she dreaded
seeing him again.

She played with the two boys here,
relieved to find
no passionate hatred
- no passionate love.
Almost it was relief
to be with children
who she merely liked
- resembling their mother
that kindly tolerant soul,
the boys in no way brilliant
just commonplace and ordinary,
and yet delightful
in their ordinariness.

Bruntal
- he was the problem
- he - and her own emotions.
The game of silence
was kept up,
he treated her
as if that recent day
was their first meeting,
treated her thus
with calm reserve,
even when they were alone
he kept the mask in place.

Somehow she knew
it could not last,
and one day on a walk
she met him in a strange and lonely place,
where a steep inland cliff
thrust rocky sides
into the rolling hills.

Ioda returning
saw Bruntal
clambering up the ferny rocks
intent on rescuing a lamb
trapped on a narrow ledge.
She stood and watched
as with strong limbs he climbed
(those sinuie arms
so many memories)



he reached the spot
placed the frightened beast
across his shoulders
and descended.
As he came down
the last steep slope
Ioda stretched her hand
as if to steady him.
And when he reached
to smoother ground
he held that hand
and would not let it go
- looked at her
a long and penetrating stare.

Both of them knew
this was the time
for breaking barriers.
After they had drunk their fill
of looking,
Bruntal cleared his throat
as if a strange impediment
half-hindered him
and began to speak.
He spoke of his shock
discovering she had gone,
of times of loneliness
- of emptiness.
Then finally meeting Ruama
- his sense
of making the most
of what life still could offer,
and following her
back to her own home village
where now they were.
Ioda then
took up her varied story
- spoke of the long long years
passed by
since they were last together.
Told him of much
yet kept a few things back
or merely hinted at them
(yes - she had memories
too painful
even to share with Bruntal)
- the thing she stressed the most
was the quest to find her father.

*He stood there silent for some while,
then said :*

"I can tell you something of your father."

*"You can ?
- how come ?"*

*"A few days after
the riots which you spoke of
I visited a local market town
to sell some sheep.
A scattering of refugees
were passing through,
ex-prisoners most of them
fleeing the soldiers.
At a fair distance
I saw your father
- could recognize him still
despite the years
- that tall
- that handsome figure.*

"You're sure ?"

*"Sure as I am
of anything
on this small world."*

*"What did you do ?
- did you speak to him ?"*

*"I called a lad
- asked him to guard my sheep.
The boy refused.
I pressed a petty bribe
into his hand
and then ran off.
But sadly
far too late
- I could not find him."*

*"Well then
he lives -
that is the great thing.
My quest will carry on."*

*Bruntal just stood there silent
his large dark eyes
fixed rigidly upon her.*

"I will come with you."

*"No - no -
how can you ?"*

*"I can
and I will."*

*"That's absurd.
Your wife...
Your children...."*

*"Nothing else matters
but only you.
You do not know
the craving I've been feeling.
Oh yes - I've kept it quiet
- kept up this mad pretence
that we were strangers to each other.
But just remember
all those long nights
you've lain between my arms.
You were mine then
and you are mine now
- I demand what is mine."*

*"It's impossible.
You are a married man,
and I'm a married woman."*

"And you love your husband ?"

*"He is a good man,
he is kind
and I respect him."*

"Is that enough ?"

*"It ought to be enough.
I do not deserve
his good opinion
- I should be grateful
that fortune has sent him."*

*"But you spoke of this quest
this search for your father -
how can you manage that
shut up in a mansion?"*

*"I don't know
- but somehow
I'll find a way."*

*"Oh no you won't.
You can find a way
but only if I come with you."*

*With this Bruntal seized her
drew her body close to his
- locked his arms in a vice-like grasp.*

*"Oh no
please - do not tempt me."*

*He looked in her eyes
and saw only desperation.
And then she struggled
- struggled so wildly
that even Bruntal's strength
could not control her.*

*He let her go
and they stood staring at each other
in animosity.*

*"Now you have ruined everything -
the peace of mind
that I was half-enjoying
- gone - gone away
- gone forever.
Now you have forced me
to go - to leave
- to see you
never again."*

*Despite these words
they walked together
still hand in hand
back to the cottage
- silently
- so silently.*

Scene twenty three

*Ioda rose before dawn
dressed
and without a word
went on her way.*

*"How many times," she thought
"have I done this ? -
fled like a thief in the night.
Is it my fate ? -
is it my character ?"*

*She did not answer
her own question,
but plodded on
watching the first grey light,
and then
seeing Van-ra-mar
appearing bold and orange
above the vanishing mist.*

*Ioda walked all day
the surroundings changed but little
- the same wide rolling hills
with stunted trees
and outcrops of dark rock.
Some shepherds passed,
she greeted them
as if she merely walked the hills
for pleasure,
and surmised
they little guessed
what tumult filled her mind.*

*As dusk drew on
she reached a rocky valley,
it seemed a place
where she might spend the night
secure and unmolested.
She stretched herself
down by a grassy bank
and, despite many troubles
fell to sleeping.*



She dreamt
(was it a dream ?)
of a small vale
much like the one she slept in.
And in the dream
she felt herself
walking along
at twilight
- ravens croaked harshly
from the crags above,
and curious cat-like forms
slunk in the shadows.

Yet in this desolate place
a fire was burning.
Ioda approached
and saw before it
an ancient woman,
and behind her
a cave mouth.
She recognized the woman
it was Mura
- the same white hair
- the same blue radiant eyes.
Even in the dream
Ioda faltered
- wondered if she should approach,
and only did so
laden down with guilt.

She sat down opposite Mura
who did not look at her,
but went on stirring a small pot
above the fire.

"So my daughter
you have come at last",
the old woman said
her eyes still focused downwards.

"Yes mother
I have come."

Then, for some while,
they sat in silence,
only the ravens croaked above.
The old lady spoke first :

"World has gone round Van-ra-mar
several times
since last we met,
and in that time
you have done evil things."

"I know
oh mother
I know that I have sinned."

"I am beyond
the barrier of death,
and see these things
more calmly than before."

"How can you be so calm
- Zat
- I have murdered Zat."

"Oh no
your aim was not as good
as you suppose ;
you did not murder Zat
- just slightly hurt him."

"That is relief.
But I have done other things
which make me tremble."

"Yes
you have indeed,
for I look across the boundary line
of life and death
and see my child Aubero
weeping and weeping
for the loss of her beautiful boy."

Ioda did not reply
and feared what was coming next :

*"Of all the evil you have done
this is one thing
you can put right.
Go to your mansion
and take the beautiful boy
back to his mother,
and when you return
carry with you
the child that is your own."*

*Ioda clawed at the earth
in her agony
for this was the hardest thing
to be asked.*

*"Oh mother
not that - not that -
anything else
to wipe away my sins,
but let me keep
the beautiful boy."*

*"No - it cannot be,
you must make this sacrifice.
Now - I have said enough
- but for myself
I forgive you
and give you my blessing."*

*So saying
she stretched out her hands
and blessed the weeping girl.*



Scene twenty four

*Ioda awoke
looked round her
and saw the actual valley
smaller
and far less wild
than in her dreams ;
for here
no ravens croaked,
only in dawning light
the larks were singing
so high above,
whilst tiny lizards stirred
in the cold dark rocks.*

*So vivid had been the dream
it seemed more real
than this reality.
All day as Ioda walked
she thought of Mura's words
- likewise the next day
- and the next.
Eventually she resolved
she really would
give up the boy
- no matter what the pain.
And still with this resolve
she saw
one day of scorching heat
the mansion's roofs
touch on the distant woods.*

*Ioda approached stealthily
- like a hunter
creeping towards his quarry,
not by the driveway
but by a long circuit
skirting round the gardens.*

And then she saw him
- the beautiful boy.
He had been bathing in a pond
and stood quite naked
at the water's edge.
She did not reveal herself,
but from a clump of bushes
looked out at him
- and with that looking
all her resolves were ended
- she would not give him up
- no - she would sooner die
than ever part with him.
And what strange nonsense
had possessed her
- that was not Mura she had spoken to
- it was a dream
and she a figure in a dream
- why be bound
by idle promises
made to the merest phantoms ?

She stayed by the bushes
- watched him dry himself
and put his clothes on.
Only then did she come out,
and at the sight
Sev ran towards her
wrapped her in his arms,
kissed her
and called her "mother",
any remaining will
to give him up
melted away.
He took her by the hand
and thus they walked together
towards the mansion.

The welcome
was warm enough,
Dedo - the servants
even Emís
put on a show
of being pleased to see her.
As for Ioda
she felt a mixture
of pain and pleasure :
pain
at the thought
that she returned alone
- her quest for her father
still frustrated ;
pleasure
mainly at being back with Sev
- the beautiful boy.

That evening she sat with Dedo
- told him all
- or almost all,
she mentioned her stay
in the shepherd's cottage,
but the story of Bruntal
and his passionate love for her
was left unsaid.

Then - following her return
life seemed to sink
back into a steady rhythm
- with scarce a thing
to break its course.
World travelled round Van-ra-mar
- the seasons came and went :
larks sang
in the springtime sky ;
butterflies visited
the flowers of summer ;
stags roared
in the dusk and in the dawn
on the autumn hills ;
and the great flocks
of migrant birds
covered the zenith
as they fled to their winter homes.

Outwardly
Ioda was content,
only the hatred of the "brothers"
seemed to mar it ;
but mostly they kept apart
- avoided conflict in the main,
yet when it came
she saw the violence in their eyes,
and knew full well
this was no childish whim
which filled their hearts.
But Ioda felt deep trouble
(or was it pleasure ?)
as through long sleepless nights
she would indulge
in waking dreams
- go through those recent moments
when, despite her half-resistance,
Bruntal had held her in his arms,
and also
those blessed times of long ago
when they'd enjoyed their loving
unimpeded.

Often these fantasies
involved some state of things
where all her hopes were granted :
she would be somewhere
(anywhere)
not just with Sev
but with his lovely sister
- Ve-me as well,
and Bruntal as her lover ;
whilst somewhere in the background
her father was restored to her at last
was blessing her
in all her happiness.

Occasionally
she thereby fell asleep
and half-dreams became full.
Then she would wake
with Dedo at her side,
and hold a well-worn quarrel with herself
argue that she rest herself content
with what she had.

Scene twenty five

The boys were grown up now
- grown to manhood,
yet enmity remained
- but since they went their ways
and seldom met
they likewise seldom quarrelled.

It was one summer
- a time of long hot days
and peaceful starry nights
Ioda noticed
that Sev had got a taste
for wandering.
He'd set off in early evening,
then return
long after dark
- later and later.
She noticed also
Emis would go off too
- not with his brother
but a short while later.

One evening from her window
Ioda spied on them.
It was a beauteous dusk
Van-ra-mar scarce had set
and bars of ruddy cloud
stretched in long lines.
The parkland all lay quiet
except for an aggressive bird
which sent aggressive crys
through the still air.

Sev was the first to leave
- he went like one
who knows his destination
- steady and forthright.

Shortly after
Emis slunk out
following his brother
- but at a distance ;
hiding behind trees
then carrying on,
then hiding once again.

What could this mean ?
Ioda pondered it
and stood at her window
whilst Lebita and Rin
the small moons rose.

She stayed there
until the middle of the night,
then - by the light of those two moons
she saw the beautiful boy
returning home ;
never before
had she seen such exaltation,
something beyond happiness
shone in his eyes,
enlightened his palid brow,
seemed almost to radiate
from his own self.

A little later
the other boy appeared,
Ioda likewise saw
his features by the climbing moons
- hatred was there
printed on every line
- hatred and envy
malice and foul intent
- stamped on his brow
and leaping from cold dark eyes.

What did it mean ?
Ioda could not break the code,
nor disentangle
what comedy
what tragedy
she saw enacted.

Scene twenty six

*A short while later
as she wandered in the garden,
Ioda saw the beautiful boy
approaching her cautiously
as if to take his chance
of catching her alone.*

*“Mother”, he said,
placing his hand on her arm,
“I have a request”.*

*“Well name it then,
there’s no need to be formal.”*

*“I want us to hold an event
here at the mansion
- a celebration
- a masked ball.”*

*“A masked ball
- what a strange request.
Why - we live so quietly here,
I have almost grown afraid
of crowds of people,
and you yourself
seem quite content
with this secluded living.”*

“It is my wish.”

*“Well then - I’ll not oppose you.
It just seems
so odd a thing to ask.
What is your motive ? -
you have a motive
of that I am quite sure.”*

“I want you to meet...”

“To meet...to meet who ?”

"A someone..."

*"A someone special
of that I have no doubt
- it is a girl*

*- tell me the truth."
The young boy blushed.*

*"Come - tell me the whole
- what colour are her eyes
and what her hair ?
Is she sinuous as a snake
or fat as a hippo ?
Now - tell me all."*

*"Oh Mother
do not tease me
it is a serious matter."*

*Ioda laughed
(a thing she seldom did)
and then replied :*

*"All right
if that's your wish
I'll speak to Dedo."*

*He kissed her
tenderly - affectionately
then went his way.*

Dedo agreed
and things were set in motion.
So quietly had they lived
that this activity
seemed like a coming storm
on the still waters
of an unruffled lake.
Food was prepared
and home-made wine
brought up from the cellars ;
masks were cut out,
costumes of fancy dress
secretly prepared
- the spinners and the sewers
were kept busy.
The beautiful boy
was rapturous ;
his brother
kept that strange and savage scowl
still on his face.
Ioda wondered at it all
and fumbled for a clue.

*

About this time
after a long hot day
at dusk Ioda wandered off
preferring best
her solitary state.
She walked and walked
and as the dark crept in
she found herself
close to a village which she did not know.
The big moon Un-ra
shone out above,
and by its light she clearly saw
the street of cottages,
a temple to some God,
and a small tavern
at the wayside's edge.

The door of the tavern opened
two drunks came out,
she was too much in shadow
for them to notice her,
but she saw them
- recognized with revulsion
her own son Emis,
then looked with curiosity
at his companion.
Something about that long drawn nose,
those wrinkled cheeks
and puckered lips
appeared familiar.
Ioda turned away
soon found a path she knew,
and as she walked
tried hard to place that drunken face.
Somehow it seemed
linked in her memory
with distant times
- the fairground
- was it the fairground ? -
and something about a juggler
came to mind.
And at these thoughts
fear swept right through her
like a rushing wind.

Scene twenty eight

One autumn evening
as light began to fade
the guests arrived
- some singly
- some in groups.
Masks and attires
of every sort were there :
jackals, hyenas,
antelopes, gazelles,
devils and demons,
Gods and Goddesses.
Ioda noticed them
merely in passing,
what she most searched for
was that especial person
who Sev had hinted at.

For the rest
there were some she knew
or shrewdly guessed at :
Emis was a knight
equipped with wooden sword,
Sev was a peddler
as of ancient times,
her husband a fisherman
- though why he hit on this disguise
she could not think
- herself - a shepherdess
with all the trappings.

But there was one amongst the guests
Ioda specially noticed,
a creature
dressed as a snake
- surely a female
with sinuous movements
- agile - graceful,
and yes - she must be young
- but what the face
that lay behind ?





The crowd assembled
- talked and joked.
A boy dressed as a fox
chased little rabbit girls
around the sofa.
And thus the moments passed
till it was time to eat.

Tables were decked
with fruit and autumn leaves,
a massive fire
burned in the ancient grate,
in a high gallery
musicians played,
and food came in
plates rattled and the glasses tinkled.

Eating completed
tables were cleared
and stacked far out of sight
- then all was set for dancing.

The musicians
no longer background
struck up tunes,
dance followed dance
till well past midnight,
then most of the guests retired
- whilst those who lingered
grouped themselves round the fire
still burning
warm in the ample grate.

Sev passed Ioda in the passage
He grabbed her arm
and whispered in her ear :

"Before the evening's out
I'll show you
the most beautiful girl you ever saw."

"So be it", she replied,
forcing a laugh,
but could not understand
why a strange gripping fear
seized on her mind.

They returned
to the group around the fire.
It was agreed
that all wear their disguises
until the moment of retiring.
About ten of them were there :
Emís - with knightly sword,
the snake-like creature,
Sev and Dedo,
some servants
and a few more guests
not yet gone home
- a curious scene
- the flickering firelight
glowing on masks and costumes.

One of the servant girls
who was dressed as a monkey
started to tell a tale
- the legend of a knight
who had lived long ago.
The company half-listened
half-dozed
as they looked into the firelight.

Only Emís
seemed to pay much attention,
and when it was over
he sprang to his feet :

"Right - you have heard Elu
dressed as a girl-monkey
tell the story of a knight.
Now you shall hear me
dressed as a knight
tell the story of a girl-monkey."

(Ioda was amazed.
Emís had looked so glum
she could not believe
he was thus entering the mood.)

But he began :

"Once long ago
there was a girl-monkey
who lived in the trees
with a troop of other monkeys.

*She was so beautiful
that all the masculine monkeys
lusted after her.
One vile and ancient male
persisted with his lechery.
She refused him,
but he would brook no halt
and ravished her...."*

*"I do not like this story",
Ioda muttered.*

*"Mother - let be",
put in Sev,
"what can be the harm
in a tale about monkeys?"*

*"I fear there is a sting
at the end of this tale."*

*"Nonsense," said Dedo,
"let Emis tell his story".*

*"I proceed
despite these interruptions.
When the girl-monkey
recovered from her ravishment
she fled away
- disgusted
- half-demented.*

*After much wandering
she joined another troop,
and noticed amongst them
a beautiful female monkey
(almost a copy of herself)
and at her breasts
twin babies suckling
- a boy and girl.
She coveted those twins
envied the mother.*

*Later on
she too gave birth to twins
likewise a boy and girl.
But these she hated
- they were ugly and evil
just like their father.*

And so she devised a scheme
- a little scheme
she would steal the beautiful twins
- put her two in their place.
The scheme misfired
- she was interrupted
just as she swapped
the ugly girl
for the beautiful boy.
And she ran off
taking the two boys with her..."

"This is a curious tale",
put in Sev.

"Curious indeed",
muttered Dedo.

"Perhaps you would like me then
to take off the story's mask,
to tell it straight
as it was told to me
by a juggler of tales
(as well as of other things)
so let me speak..."

"Have done - have done",
screamed Ioda,
"I cannot bear it".

"I'll not have done
and thus continue,
only - from now on
forget the monkeys
let us just speak of 'brothers'.

Eventually
one of the so-called 'brothers'
(the 'beautiful brother'
- may the Gods curse him)
is seen going off
mysteriously of an evening.

The other 'brother'
wonders what this means,
decides to spy on him,
and so one twilight
he follows on.

It takes but little time
before discovery
- a tryst
there in the woods
- a young fair girl
her beauty undecipherable.

They kiss
and then the girl
slips off her dress
stands there
as naked as a sapling oak in winter.
And then the spying brother
knows all the craving
all the lust
a man can feel,
and yet he watches helpless
as his false sibling
wallows in every pleasure
- smothers her breasts - her thighs
with rapid kisses,
lets his hands rove
on every part
of that fair form,
parts her fine legs
- thrusts in
- has all his joy,
whilst he who lurks in shadows
feels such a painful envy
that all the tortures
from every prison in our World
could scarce express..."

"Stop
- stop this story
- stop it at once."

It was a girl's voice
breaking out
from underneath
the snake's-head mask.

But in reply
Emis but flung the mask
from off his face.

"What are you saying?"
put in Dedo.

*"I am saying many things.
Amongst the rest
that my own mother and your wife
is but a liar and a thief."*

*"It isn't true",
screamed Dedo.*

*But Ioda between sobs
shouted still louder :*

*"It is true.
Oh - by the Gods
it's true".*

*"I have not finished",
the narrator growled impatiently,
"Now" - he turned to the snake-head girl,
"take off your mask".*

*She hesitated
- he tore it off himself
revealing to the company,
a girl, quite young,
with flowing yellow hair
blue eyes
and features so exquisite
they held their breath.*

*Ioda looked at her
- she knew that face
though many moons had set
since she beheld its infant form.*

*"So now my 'brother'",
Emis sneered,
"look on that face".*

*"She is the girl I love
- so what ?"*

*"So - many things
and one thing in particular,
a thing I know about this girl
that you do not.
Look at her
all of you
- those fair features
that yellow hair
the blue blue eyes,*

does she perhaps
call to your minds
some other face that you have seen ?”

No one replied
they merely looked and wondered,
whilst Emis strode towards Sev
and tore off his mask.

“There we are ‘brother’ Sev
- look on Pesuri
your twin sister.”

Emis stepped back
as if he mockingly
admired the couple.
But Sev sprang forwards
grabbed Pesuri in his arms.

“I care not who she is
or what she is
- she is the girl I love
and none shall part us.”

And at these words
intensest anger
showed on the face of Emis.
He drew his “wooden” sword,
but in the firelight
it gleamed the gleam of steel.
Before anyone could guess
he flung the girl aside
sprung towards Sev
and thrust him through.
Blood splattered out
- on masks - on costumes.
Everyone screamed
except Ioda
who silently
fled from the room
- rushed from the house
- out through the garden gate.
Anything to be away
from that vile hateful place.

Scene twenty nine

Ioda fled
- no time to think
all else was smothered
in that one urge
- to get away.

Right through the night
she walked and ran
scarce stopping to draw breath.
Yet her actions
were not absolutely wayward
some sense was guiding her
some instinct
shaped her steps
her progress and her thoughts.

A few days later
she reached a tiny hamlet
beyond which
over a shallow valley
lay wide and grassy hills.
She lingered here a while
living off charity.
The three moons climbed the sky
and waxed and waned,
and still she stayed
- looked at her past life
- weighed what things she wanted
- rested from the shock.

One day out walking
she found a deserted cottage
there on a slope
close to the grassy hills.
She looked around
and felt a sense
this was a semi-home,
and going out
to a small wood
she gathered sticks
and lit a fire.

The cottage became home
- a sanctuary
- a retreat.

Here was no comfort
except for the burning logs,
and yet in her present state
this seemed enough.
And then she would walk around,
and look towards those grassy hills
- look out for him she sought
- and sometimes
saw him far off
guiding his sheep,
and felt a quite unquenchable longing
strong in her heart.

One dusk
as the lone fern owl
flew at the woodland's edge,
she wandered thus
- climbed up a knoll
and watched as Bruntal
gathered his sheep
into a fold.
She crossed a stretch of hillside
and stood in the shadow of a rock
beside his homeward path.
He did not see her
till he was quite upon her,
then gave her a look
such as a buffalo calf
might give to a lioness
who lies in ambush.

"You seem afraid",
she said - half-smiling,
as, with no hint of permission,
she took him in her arms.

"Ioda
you startled me."

"Well
I am flesh and blood
- not some strange spirit
sent from the realms of death."

Bruntal made no reply,
he merely looked
into her violet eyes.

"Come with me",
that was all she said,
then she took his hand
and led him towards her cottage.
The fire she had left in the grate
was burning low,
she threw on some logs
and let the flames
kindle and dance.
And when it was warm
gently and slowly she undressed
- undressed herself
- undressed her would-be lover.

"Well then
I fear I'm no longer
the beautiful young girl
you once enjoyed."

"You are yourself
- yes - you are lovely still",
and he stretched his hand
tentatively towards her
as if supposing
she were some phantom.

Ioda drew her auburn hair
between her hands :
"Look - do you see
this one grey hair ?
- there will be many more".

"I will pluck it out",
answered Bruntal,
as he pulled it by the roots
and flung it in the fire,
"Tonight we are young again".

"Yes - tonight
and for many nights
if the Gods permit."





*"Surely they will permit.
But don't talk any more
lets just enjoy."*

*He kissed her lips
- her breasts,
parted her thighs
- fondled her Venus-mouth.
Outside a thin rain fell
- sent droplets down the chimney
to hiss on the burning logs.
But they cared not
- the universe held their flesh
and nothing more ;
and thus
their passion ran its course
till in its afterglow
they lay in a long embrace
by the neglected fire.*

*Eventually
Bruntal stood up.*

"I must get back."

*Ioda gave a look
of longing and reluctance,
and yet she knew
it must be so.*

*He quickly dressed
and opened the door.*

*"Whenever you want me
you know where I am."*

*That was all that was said
- and then the last lingering kiss
and he went trudging off
into the darkness.*

*Ioda stood at the door
till the glimmering of his form
faded to nothingness.*

Scene thirty

And so
whenever Bruntal felt the craving
he came to her,
and there
in the firelight
they satisfied their love.

Ioda
for her part
felt as if her youth
had now come back to her,
as in a trance
she gloried in this passing happiness
- scarce thinking of the past,
nor pondering
what waited there beyond.

One long and darkening afternoon
Ioda went out wandering alone
through fields and woods.

Eventually
she came to a highish hill
almost a mountain,
climbed it
and from its summit
looked upon the view.

Far to one side
lay the great city Zac-u-lot
(how she hated it)
she hated likewise
that range of hills
which stretched towards the mansion.
She turned her eyes from these
and let them rest
on Opaxar
the mighty lake
tremblingly touched
by Van-ra-mar's fading rays,
and then beyond the lake
those snowy mountains
- peak after peak
of meltless white.

Why at that moment
her father came to mind
she could not say.

But with mild shock
there came into her thoughts
that long and winding quest
along the zig zag pathway of her life.
What was achieved ? -
anything ? -
nothing ?
She did not understand
but knew thus far
it was a mission unfulfilled.

That evening
as she stood by the fire with Bruntal
she told him of her feelings.
He sat there long
looking in dreamy thoughtfulness
at the dancing flames.
At last he spoke :

"Your father
- I understand the feeling
- this quest,
for he had something in his nature
inspiring
lifting us far above
the banal and mundane.
But yet
if we go on this search
where do we look ? -
where do we go ?"

"You once said
unconditionally
you would go with me."

"I did
and yes I will,
but there are problems
- you cannot blame me
for seeing problems."

"I know - I know -
I realize very well
how many times
world has gone round Van-ra-mar
since his arrest.

Where is he now ? -
is he alive or dead ?
I have a faith
that he's alive
and yet it may be wishfulness alone.
And then sometimes
I think it would be better
simply to live our lives
harmonized
in the spirit which he taught
- to live here plainly
- forget the terrible things
which have gone before
- live for each other
and the world around."

Bruntal was silent for some while.
At last he said :

"What about Amura
and our two children ?"

Ioda did not know
what to reply to this.
And then her lover added :

"What about the sheep ?"

At this Ioda laughed
- she could not help it.
And then they merely sat
looking at the half-burnt logs
- like fragments of an ancient land.

Next day - near dusk
Ioda went out wandering once again
- a different route
towards a sprawling wood
almost a forest.
Darkness was coming on
as she moved
between the tacet trees,
but yet she felt no fear
instinctively she knew
the way back homeward.
She even felt no fear
as she watched a curious figure
coming towards her.

Even at a distance
Ioda knew that small dark creature

"Ve-me", she called, "Ve-me",
and they ran towards each other
embraced
and kissed a thousand times.
They stood there holding hands
- scarce speaking,
as Unra (the biggest moon)
rose slowly through the empty trees.
At last Ioda spoke
- poured out all the turbulent happenings
since last they met.
Then she looked at Ve-me :

"You are still alone ?"
she asked.

"I will always be alone
- unless - unless..."

"Unless what ?"

"Unless
I am united with my people."

"They say they live
on an island
in the midst of Opaxar
- the mighty lake."

"I too have heard that legend."

"You think it is only a legend
- but I have heard it
several times
from different people."

"It may be true
- but what if it is ?
How do you think
my people will receive me ? -
I - who have been
so long away
- all that vast time has passed
since I communed
with one of my own kind

- my mother - my mother
- would she were with me now
to comfort me
- to guide me."

"I will go with you."

"How can you ? -
you have ties close by.
No - if I ever go
I will go alone,
besides
you still search for your father."

For some while
Ioda just stood thinking,
then she struck her hand
against her forehead :

"Why did I never
- never think of this before ?
My father
he loved your people
believed they should be left
- unharmed - at peace.
That being so
maybe he dwells amongst them
- he might be living yet
there on the island."

"It is a thought."

"It is a marvellous thought.
How strange
its taken all this while
to come to me.
I know - I know
- all things are becoming clear
- together
that's how we'll go
- Bruntal and you and me."

"If that's your wish
so be it."

"You seem alarmed."

*"I think of my people
- how will they treat me ?
And yet
it is my destiny,
I cannot live all life
without this effort
- this attempt
to know the people who I sprang from.
But what will Bruntal say ?"*

*"Leave that to me
- I hope I can persuade him,
and when all's settled
we will come back.
Where will we find you ?"*

"I will be waiting."

"No matter how long it takes ?"

"No matter how long."

*They kissed once more
and then Ioda took her leave.
As she returned
black sky beyond the branches
turned to grey ;
an unseen owl
gave its last hooting cry ;
and then Van-ra-mar rose
into clear sky.*

*Ioda's mind
was once more filled with hope.*

Scene thirty one

*Next day
when Bruntal and Ioda were alone
she shared her thoughts :*

*"I had a strange meeting
in the woodland yesterday."*

*Bruntal looked up
(was it a mocking look)
but she went on
told him about Ve-me
the conversation
and the idea
that they might find her father
there on the island
in the middle of Opaxar.
But at the end
all that he muttered was :*

*"I have my wife
my children
and my sheep."*

*Ioda let things rest
- said not a word
for several days.*

*Then - seemingly half in jest
she dropped her hints
every so often.*

*Bruntal said little
scowled and muttered,
till finally he spoke
in a mood of semi-anger :*

*"Right, we will go,
I know it is your great desire.
I will leave my wife
my children
and sell the sheep
- then we will be off."*

He did as he said
except he sold
but half the sheep
leaving some sustenance
for his abandoned family.

And thus
latish one afternoon
without farewell to anyone
they left.
Rooks swung through the sky
in cackling flocks,
a heron flew
on wide and palid wings
above the stream,
and bars of pinkish cloud
hovered above
Van-ra-mar's setting.

Ioda led the way
straight to the woodland
clutching Bruntal's hand.
She made for that spot
where she had last seen Ve-me,
and there, sure enough,
slinking between the trees
the curious creature came.

Despite the long delay
Ve-me seemed unsurprised
as if she knew the day
the very hour of their appearing.
She met them
greeted them
and led them to a bower
where the three of them
would spend the night.

Ioda felt relieved
once more to be upon her quest
- that journey she had started long ago
- where would it end ?

They rose up
to a dull grey dawn
of shifting mist,
a wood-dove cooed beyond,

and a yaffle
far in the trees
drummed out its message.

Breakfast
was fruits, berries and mushrooms,
then they set off
Ve-me leading the way
for she seemed to have
a preternatural sense
of where to go.
Through many days they journeyed
- woods - fields and valleys,
villages and minor towns.

One morning
on climbing up a wooded hill
they saw
(some distance off)
Opaxar - the mighty lake.
More like a sea it was
- almost an ocean,
for they could make out
no further shore,
nor any signs
of the big island.
All that they noticed
was that to one side
the foothills rose
up to the white white mountains
Ioda had first seen
so long ago ;
and also down below
some sort of port
perched on the nearest shore.

They descended from the hill,
and the port became more clear
- it had two harbours
- a headland in between :
the first
was merely a place for fishing
- small boats were there
bobbing the licking waves,
and humble streets and taverns
clustered round ;
the second was more imposing
flanked by battlements,
and, resting now at anchor,
a fleet of ships of war.

Scene thirty two

They reached the port at dusk
went to the fishing area
where on the lifting waves
the dark boats bobbed
in the light of the smallest moon.

Around the shore
fishermen cleaned their nets,
lovers walked by,
and from the tavern doors
came light and music
and the smell
of strange delicious food.

The three of them
entered a tavern
ordered a meal
(for Bruntal had cash
made from the sale of sheep)
and as they ate
singers appeared
mounted a small square stage
their voices
sounding against a background
of twanging strings.

There was one girl
who especially drew their eyes
- quite young she was
with flowing auburn hair,
her supple body
moved so gracefully,
and the singing notes
harmonized with herself.

Ioda
listened and looked intently,
Bruntal as well
seemed mesmerized
- absorbed her swaying hair
- her flashing eyes.

The young girl finished
left the stage
sat in a corner.

*And at that moment
some ancient memory
stirred in Ioda's brain.
She leapt up
ran towards the girl.*

*"Sister - sister
- are you not Ura
my own true sister ?"*

*The other glanced up
as if she thought her mad,
then recognition
came to her also.*

*"Sister
- darling sister."*

*They embraced
clung to each other
for some while,
then walked to the table
towards the other two.*

*Bruntal remembered her
as a small freakish girl
loving even then
to sing - to dance ;
he greeted her,
spoke of times long past.
Ve-me rose in her seat
but Ura merely stared
as if she were an animal
- a curious pet.*

*Much talk then passed
between the sisters.
Ura told
how at a certain age
she too set off to seek her father.
To seek as well
for something else
- experience perhaps,
and it appeared
she'd had her fill of that,
singing and dancing
in innumerable taverns.*

Lovers were mentioned
and then passed over
for the next adventure.

"I've made a lot of money",
she said at last,
"Spent lots of it as well.
But I have a house
down by the fishing quay
- come to it now
- come - be my guests."

They found her house
comfortable - clean
close by the little boats
lilting on the dark dark lake.
For Ioda at least
it was almost a home-coming
as she and Ura
turned over distant memories.
It came to bed time
- Bruntal and Ioda
were to share a room,
but Ve-me was lead
out into the yard
to a ramshackle shed
- almost a kennel.

"Oh no
- she sleeps with us",
Ioda said.

"Well - let it be
- whatever you may wish."

*


Little by little
they told Ura of their plans.
The girl was sceptical
- how could their father be there
on the island
with only Heralots for company ?

All this was linked
with her attitude to Ve-me,
but gradually
her feeling changed.

She no longer thought of her
as an animal
once she realized
she could converse with her.
Helped by this understanding
Ura grew fascinated
with thoughts of the island
- what was it like ? -
what were the Heralots like
seen as a group ? -
how would they behave ?
And so eventually
Ura told her sister
she would fall in with her plans
- go to the island,
see what clues it held.
But still she did not think
that they would find their father.

The next problem
was to find a fisherman
who would take them there.
This proved
a difficult job,
for fishermen
are a superstitious lot
the universe over.
Legends there were
about the Heralots,
how men had landed
and ended up
sacrificed to their gods.
“No one”, they were told,
“could circumnavigate the island
and come back living”.

Eventually
they found a man called Fo-lo,
young to middle-aged
- ruddy bulbous nose
high cheeks
and sparkling eyes.
They told him their plans,
he cogitated long
glanced towards Ura
and then said “I’ll go”.



Early it was
and the two small moons
were bright in the cold grey sky
as they walked towards the boat.


"This going too ?"
- the fisherman nodded towards Ve-me.

"She is our friend."

"Ah - well
- so be it."
The slight wind stirred the sails ;
the seaport
(where suspicious eyes
still lay in sleep)
receded ;
and they were off
over flat waters
where the waves scarce heaved.

Three days they sailed
across that lake
which almost was a sea.
Little they saw
till on the fourth
tall misting peaks
came into view
- jagged and strange,
with sweeping slopes
covered in lush green trees.

Two days or so
they sailed along the rocky coast,
and then weighed anchor
in a sandy bay
- wide and expansive.
All that they did was look
and yet they saw
but little signs of life :
white sea-mews screamed,
and cormorants dived from rocks
at fish which glinted in the shimmering waves.
But on the land
nothing seemed moving
in the noontide heat,



and likewise as they watched
through the long afternoon
there was no stir
no rustle,
not so much as a glimpse
of any creature
wandering through the trees.

But as day failed
they saw that something moved
- a light
and then another
and another
- bright flaming torches
carried by shadowy creatures
they could scarce make out.

The five in the boat
stood watching,
Ve-me above all
strained through the dusk
with eyes of wonderment
- what did it mean ? -
what was it all about ?

At first
they saw little more,
but as their eyes grew accustomed to the dark
the shadowy forms which bore them
became clearer
- and it wasn't just the torch-bearers,
for creatures in their hundreds
were assembling.

Yes - they were the Heralots
- the squat dark forms
were kindred souls to Ve-me,
and all were joined
in some fantastic dance.
Yet they saw other beings too
- animals
some familiar
- some quite strange :
antelopes, rhinos, pigs and hippos,
monkeys and lions, leopards and giraffes,
and those to which they couldn't put a name
- horned - antlered
with armour-plated sides





strange colours
and long twisting tails.
What were they ? -
merely Heralots dressed up
or did they see the actual beasts themselves ?
And sounds came to them
over the still still lake
- cries, grunts and screams,
nothing articulate
even to Ve-me's ears,
and yet her small but graceful body
began to sway
as to a rhythm
no one else detected.

Then, towards midnight,
two special creatures came in sight
- a male - a female
walking hand in hand
slowly and solemnly
in gorgeous dress.
And as they moved
the others made a path
as if acknowledging
their specialness
and yet
no creature bowed before the pair
but all stretched out towards them
- a hand - a paw
as if in blessing,
accompanying the gesture with a song
- a weird unworldly humming.

Well before dawn
the celebrations and the rituals ended :
the torches were extinguished ;
the shadowy figures
no longer moved
in sequences of grace ;
and songs and murmurings
fell back to silence.

Those in the boat
safe in the disguise of darkness
sailed from the shore
and were already
some way off
before Van-ra-mar
rose glowing on the horizon.

They carried on
and then dropped anchor
by a long and flat peninsular
covered in meagre grass
which further on gave way
to scrub and dwarfish bushes,
merging eventually
into grey woodland.

All day
they merely thought and talked
of what they'd seen and felt.

Ioda
looked at the island
- its long and winding shores,
its distant mountains
where cascading rivers
glinted in light.
She realized now
this was no desert isle
but a country in itself
- cut up by rocky peaks,
dense forests,
foaming streams
- how could they ever search this place
with any hope
of finding out her father ?
And with this thought
there came another
- a strong conviction
her father was not there.
Whence this conviction came
she could not say,
and yet she now felt sure
searching for him
in this green place
was futile.
Somehow she knew
he was elsewhere.

Ioda looked long at the island
but Ve-me looked much longer.
Eventually Ioda said :

"What are you thinking of ?"

Ve-me turned her small dark body
and looked up.

*"I am thinking
I must go to my people."*

*"Is it safe ?
Why not stay with us
and be content ?"*

*"No
I can never be content
- not now I have seen them.
All my life I have wondered
if this time would ever come.
Now it is come
- I must not let it pass."*

"Perhaps they will kill you."

*"Perhaps they will
- though they looked peaceable
as we saw them yesterday.
But be that as it may,
I will go to them
it is my destiny."*

*She made a move
as if she meant to go
that very moment.
But Ioda lent her body down
placed one hand on her shoulder :*

*"Stay
- stay with us one more night
- think of it
- dream of it.
And if at dawn
you still feel you must go
- well - go then,
and we and the Gods will bless you."*

*Ioda wept,
but Ve-me merely said :*

"I will stay just one more night."

Next day
dawned grey and chill.
Ioda looked out from the boat
at the long peninsula
barren except for grass,
at the bushes and the trees beyond.
To her
the island now appeared
a place of fear and dread,
as if some terrible catastrophe
hovered above.

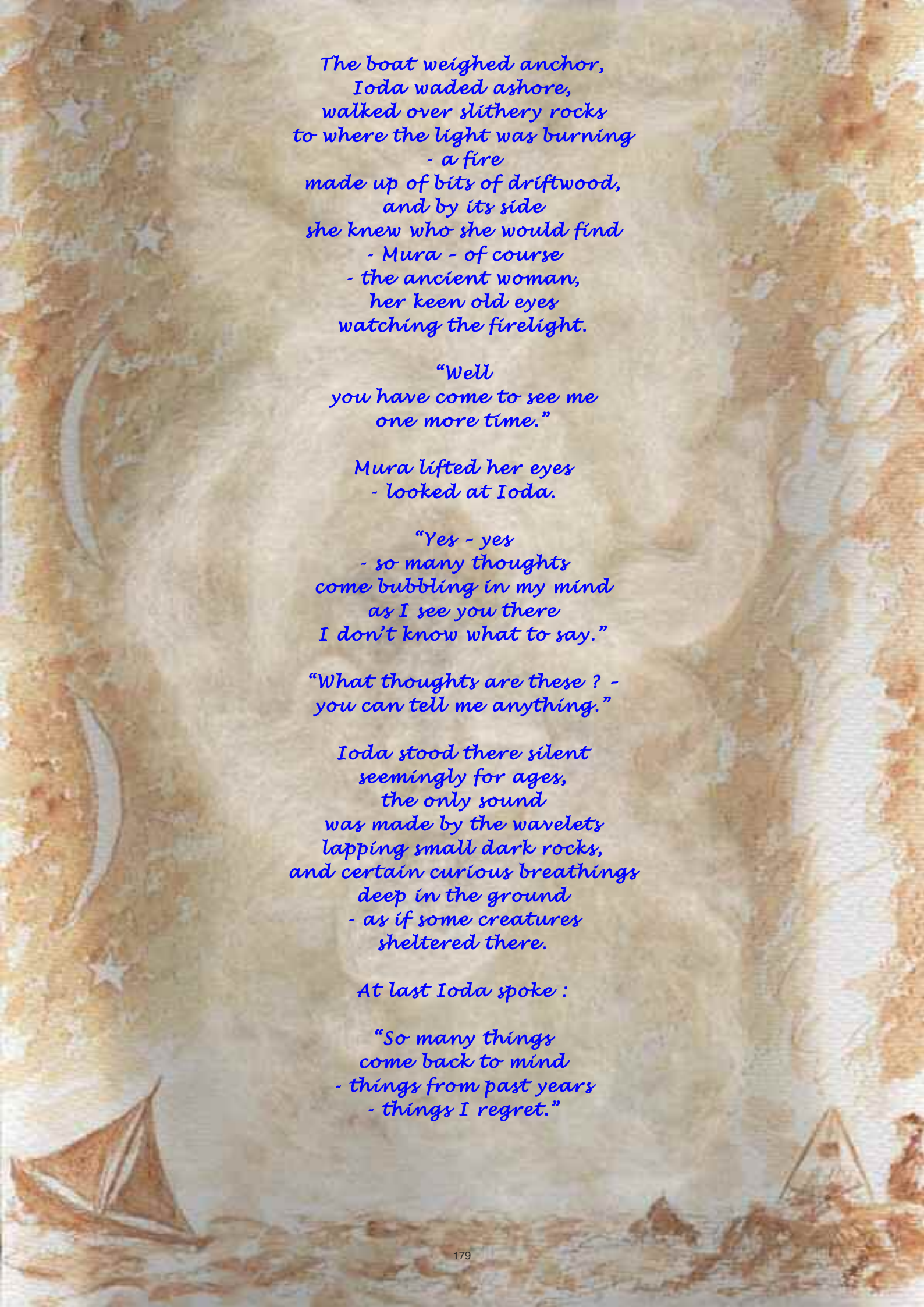
Ve-me got up
prepared herself
without one utterance.
And she took nothing with her
- nothing at all.
Ioda wrapped her
in one last embrace,
and then they watched
as she waded to the shore.

Ioda
kept her eyes
on the retreating figure,
and stayed there looking
long after
that small dark form
merged into greyness.

Scene thirty three

Ioda rallied
came back as from a trance
- turned to the others
- looked at them.
Without one word being spoken
it was as if
an order had been given.
The boatman set the sails
- only the slightest wind
billowed the canvas,
but they set off
- the island grew more dim,
until it sank
over the curved horizon.

Little was said that day,
each of the four
thought their own thoughts
and kept them to themselves.
When night closed in
Ioda laid herself
down in the boat
and drowsed
and then it seemed
she roused herself
and saw by the light
of the two minor moons
another island
- a small small island
- little more than a group of flattened rocks,
and on this isle
a light was burning.



The boat weighed anchor,
Ioda waded ashore,
walked over slithery rocks
to where the light was burning
- a fire
made up of bits of driftwood,
and by its side
she knew who she would find
- Mura - of course
- the ancient woman,
her keen old eyes
watching the firelight.

"Well
you have come to see me
one more time."

Mura lifted her eyes
- looked at Ioda.

"Yes - yes
- so many thoughts
come bubbling in my mind
as I see you there
I don't know what to say."

"What thoughts are these ? -
you can tell me anything."

Ioda stood there silent
seemingly for ages,
the only sound
was made by the wavelets
lapping small dark rocks,
and certain curious breathings
deep in the ground
- as if some creatures
sheltered there.

At last Ioda spoke :

"So many things
come back to mind
- things from past years
- things I regret."

*"Yes
you have lived a selfish life,
but not completely selfish."*

*"You think that ?
I suppose you are right,
and yet
I did not set out to be selfish.
The motives which I had
when I was young
seemed good and pure,
what happened on the way
I cannot tell."*

*"Ah
many a one
is like yourself.
And yet
what point is there regretting ?
The actions we have done
are frozen into distant icicles
which never melt."*

*Again there was silence
while Ioda fought
with different questions
rising in her mind.*

*"Tell me
tell me about Pesuri
the beautiful girl
where is she now ?"*

*"Pesuri -
she is dead
she died of grief."*

*"May the Gods and Goddesses
bring comfort to her soul."*

*"Yes
may it be
just as you say."*

*"And Emis
and Bestro ?"*

*"Their lives are filled with hatred
- hatred for their mother
- how could it not be so ?"*

*Ioda did not reply
but looked down at the fire
- noticed seven small fishes
cooking in its flames.*

*Mura followed her gaze
took four fishes
and gave them to Ioda
who ate them greedily.
Having eaten them
she saw no point in lingering.*

*"Thank you for the fishes",
she said
for want of anything clearer in her mind.
Then added :
"Shall I see you again ?"*

*"Yes
you will see me
one last time."*

Scene thirty four

*Ioda waded to the boat
lay down
and slept again.
When she came to
Van-ra-mar was shining brightly.
She looked around
expecting to see the rocky isle
but it was nowhere
- the meeting with Mura
- was it another dream ?*

*Two days
and then the seaport came in view.
What then ?
Ioda carried on her quest
randomly
asked passers by
if they had seen her father
the thing seemed futile
hopeless
yet she persisted,
and thus the days went by
in fruitless toil.*

*One afternoon of warmth
she loitered by the harbour wall.
An aged fisherman stood nearby
mending nets.
His eyes met her's
she went across and spoke,
at first
about indifferent matters
- the weather
- then the state of fishing.
At last she asked :*

*"The Island
- have you visited the Island ?"*

*"Why yes
I went there once
some years ago."*

"Alone ?"

"No - not alone,
a man was with me.
He wanted to see the place
- view the country
where the Heralots lived."

"What sort of man ?"

"Oldish he was
- but not as old as me
- tall - strong
- handsome in his way
- a sort of face
striking
not easily forgotten."

"And what did you do
once you were at the Island ?"

"Why - not so much.
We just sailed round
- watched from afar
those curious creatures
- their frantic rituals
- all that kind of thing,
and that was that."

"What then ?"

"We just returned."

"And this tall man
- what was his name ?"

"He never gave his name.
There was something strange
- a mystery about the fellow."

"Is he around here still ? -
is he alive ?"

"After a while
he went off on his wanderings
- look
- see."

He pointed
with a skinny hand
across the bay
at three long lines of hills
each higher than the rest
- foothills
of those white peaks
Ioda first had seen
so long ago.

"See where I point
- that furthest ridge of hills.
Just beyond
there lives a holy man
well-known hereabouts
for his great wisdom.
This tall man who I speak of
went up to visit him,
he told me he was wearied
of many things
which touched his earlier life :
politics
- the struggling up for power
and all that sort of thing.
He had a mind
to spend his latter days
far from this strife
in peace and meditation
under the guidance
of this holy man."

"I see.
You have told me many things
- more that you know of."

"I may know more
that you think I know."

The old man smiled
and gave Ioda
a penetrating look.
And then he placed
his hand upon her arm :

"You have my blessing.
May the Gods go with you."

Scene thirty five

Ioda did not return
immediately to Ura's home,
but climbed to a spot
high up above the seaport
- looked down
on the twin harbours
and the little boats that bobbed
on the Great Lake,
then turned
to scan the foothills,
and gazed
at those sharp snowy peaks.
And thus she thought and thought
till afternoon had waned
and dusk was coming on.

She clambered down
walked through the narrow streets
full of the café lights
and shreds of music,
and made her way
across to Ura's home.
But as she entered by the garden gate
the smell of summer flowers
assailed her senses.

Ioda paused
saw by the light of Un-ra
the shrubs, the flowers, the trees,
and also something else
- a couple close to the house
locked in an embrace.
She slunk behind a bush
and watched
as they pressed their mouths
most rapturously together,
and let their wandering hands
caress each other.
They stayed thus long,
and then reluctantly
entered the house.

Ioda
stayed behind her bush a little longer
and then went in.

Scene thirty six

*Ioda
entered the house
acted her part
as if nothing of note
had taken place.*

*That night
she lay alongside Bruntal
lovingly - affectionately
as she had done
so many times before.
And slumber came
deep and restorative.*

*Next morning
she behaved
quite normally.
Only at mid-day
when the meal was over
did she make a move.*

*And then
without a word
she took one hand of Ura's
one of Bruntal's
and pressed them close together.
Both reddened.*

*"Stop pretending
- you love each other
why not acknowledge it ?"*

*The two
withdrew their hands
and looked at her
- their eyes spoke many questions.*

*In answer
Ioda took some strands
of her long hair
and started counting.*

*"How many grey hairs
d'you think I'll find
in this one handful?"*

*Neither replied.
Ioda then continued :*

*"Twenty
- twenty in this one strand.
Not long ago
all would have been bright auburn."*

*"My breasts and hips
are sagging
- no longer the tender firmness
they once had.
My eyes are clouding
- there are wrinkles round my mouth.
No Bruntal
- do not look at me
look there - at Ura
- she is young and beautiful,
it is but natural
you should prefer her now to me."*

*She stopped
- looked in the others' eyes.
They held surprise
yet also some relief.*

*"You aren't angry?"
Ura gasped.*

*"No - I am not angry.
It is fate
- destiny.
Besides
you need not think of me
for I am going on a journey."*



"When ?"

*"This very day.
I shall be off
before Van-ra-mar sets."*

"But where will you go ?"

*"Up to the foothills
in search of father.
I have a clue
which must be followed up."*

"We will come with you."

*"Oh no.
I must be quite alone."*

*You will not miss me
for you'll find all your pleasure
in each other."*

*Ioda smiled
not cynically
but with a look
accepting how things were
- a feeling
that was almost close
to happiness.*

Scene thirty seven

*Shortly afterwards
Ioda wandered off
not bothering with farewells.
She merely gathered up
a few warm clothes
a little food
and left.*

*She scarce had reached
beyond the city walls
before Van-ra-mar
sank beyond the lake.
She went a little further
aided by Un-ra's light
till, at the edge of open country,
she laid herself to rest.*

*It took three days
to cross the rolling foothills,
and then at nightfall
she reached the crest
of the third and highest ridge.*

*Beyond
lay one more dip,
and then the mountains
- those snowy peaks
never before seen close.
Ioda sat down mesmerized,
the heights above
frightened, and yet inspired her.*

*She let her eyes
follow the lower slopes,
and yes
there was the hut
home of the holy man.
Should she go on ? -
reach it perhaps
beneath the stars of midnight.*

*But no
she was too tired,
tomorrow
yes - tomorrow she would reach it.*

Better by far to just lie down
- to sleep - to dream

*

Ioda stood
at the mouth of a vast cave
- its roof
festooned with dripping stalactites
- stalagmites on the floor
and beyond all that
everything dimming into darkness.
Yet somehow
the darkness was inviting.
She had a lighted candle in her hand
and with its guidance
wandered in,
though what her motive was
she could not say.
But on she went
past weird contorted shapes,
gleaming cream rocks
like the heads of ancient creatures,
grottos
and veils of half-translucent stone,
whilst on the walls
a million bats
clung to the slippery sides,
whilst curious snake-like worms
wriggled beneath her feet.

After much wandering
the system opened out
and she was in a spacious chamber.
Somehow Ioda knew
that here was what she sought.
Near to the centre
was a slab of rock,
and on the top
a pile of ancient garments.
Ioda held them up
one at a time
recognizing each :
this - with a red hyena's head
Zilwar - God of Revenge ;

beside it
a lion of deeper scarlet
- Farshar - God of War ;
and then the eagle
of sky-stained turquoise blue
- Vila - Goddess of Justice ;
and there were many more
ending with that woodland pigeon
its wings glinted with gold
- Cura - Goddess of Love.

Ioda laid them down
and then cried out :

“Where are the Gods themselves ?
- the Goddesses
- where are they ?”

Yet all the reply she got
were her own clear words
echoed
from the cavern walls.

And at that instant
the candle flickered out.

“What shall I do ?” she cried,
and mockingly
the cave repeated back
her helpless question:
“What shall I do ?”

But then she felt a wing
passing above her head,
a gleam of hope
entered her mind
- the bats were leaving
for their nocturnal foraging.

Ioda sensed
the direction of their flight,
and aided just by this
she moved with caution
across the slimy floor.

Eventually
a dim dim light appeared.

She opened up her eyes
- found herself on the sloping hills.

Scene thirty eight


*Ioda looked across
at the hut of the holy man.
Her father
- was this the day
after all those weary years
they'd be united ?
Could it be ? -
was it possible ?*

*She started walking
down slopes that were strewn with boulders,
whilst high above
a large and curious bird
hovered on black black wings.*

*But Ioda
buoyed up with hope
noticed other things :
the tiny copper-coloured butterflies
fluttering through the heather ;
the dragonflies
which came and went
on fine translucent wings ;
the little moths
that lingered by the harebells.*

*Eventually
she reached the hut,
no-one was around,
there was only a garden
where, despite the height,
some stunted thorn-trees grew
their branches decked
with scarlet berries.*

*She knocked.
The door swung open
with such abruptness
she almost screamed.
An old man stood before her
- kind face
- green eyes
- a long, but not unruly beard.*



He smiled
held out his hands
took both of hers :
"So - you have come at last."

"Then you expected me ?"

"Yes - I expected you
- tall, and with auburn hair,
why yes
I've pictured you
so many times.
But you are tired
- sit down
just rest a little."

Up till that moment
Ioda had not sensed
how tired she was.
She sank in a chair
- glanced round.


The hut was small
it held no other person
simply that holy man.

"My father ?"

"Your father is not far away."

He gave her a look
as if to imply
she should not question further.
And she sank down
and closed her eyes.
Over her mind
there came a sense of peace
all apprehension gone.

Ioda rested for some while
- neither spoke.
Then she got up
- the hermit likewise rose,
opened the door
and taking her by the hand
led her along a grassy track.



After a bit
they came to a little mound
grown over
with grasses and wild flowers.
Without a word
the holy man
pointed towards the mound.
Ioda guessed his meaning
- her quest was ended,
here at last - her father
- his last
- his final home.

She did not weep
instead she touched the ground
- how dry and soft it felt !
They both sat down.
Ioda
with a seeming interest
looked at the bees
bending the honeyed flowers.
And somehow it was as if
all her long life
she'd known it would be thus
- the holy man
he was expecting her,
and she too in her way
expecting him.

At last Ioda spoke :

"How did he die ?"

"He died
as men would wish,
at peace with himself
and with the universe."

The background of the page is a soft, painterly illustration. It depicts a field of tall, golden-brown grass at the bottom. Above the grass, a large, pale yellow sun or moon is partially obscured by a soft, hazy glow. Several insects are scattered across the scene: a butterfly in the upper left, a dragonfly in the lower left, a bee in the upper right, a moth in the middle right, and two beetles, one in the middle left and one in the lower right. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by yellows, oranges, and browns.

"And with the Gods ?"

*"The Gods - the Goddesses
- they are within us all
- the demons too
- in this small blade of grass
- in you - in me
- in every moon
and every star."*

*She did not answer
merely went on looking at the bees.*

*Eventually
the old man rose :*

*"I'll leave you for a while
to think your thoughts.*

*When you are ready
come back down to the hut
there will be food for you.*

*Don't stay too long
- its pleasant now
but once Van-ra-mar sets
it soon gets cold."*

*She merely smiled
and watched him totter down
towards the hut.*

Scene thirty nine

Ioda sat there for a while
and then got up.
She looked down at the hut
then upwards
at the towering mountain peaks.
Something within her mind
- something she couldn't understand
urged her to go beyond
- to climb a little higher.

So she set off
along the path
which wound in mighty sweeps
steeper and steeper.
Tiredness had left her
hunger alone remained,
but then she found
down in a hollow
a clump of purple mushrooms.
They seemed just like
those near the tiny cave mouth
she'd found so long ago
- they'd done her good
and so would these.
She gathered up a handful
- delicious - quite delicious,
she gathered more and more
till she was satisfied,
and then resumed
the footpath up the mountain.

At a high point she paused
looked out
to where Van-ra-mar
was near to setting.
The scene was vast
- all of Opaxar
lay serene below her,
the Island too
- its woodlands - rivers - mountains.
And far beyond she saw
(or thought she saw)
those warm lush hills
where she had spent her childhood.

*And then she noticed something else
- a bird*

*a great metallic bird
hovering above the Island.*

*She scarce had seen it
when there came a flash
- blue - blue - intensely blue
blinding in its intensity,
so that she turned away
- sheltered behind a rock.*

*But the brilliance faded
quick as it had come,
soon all was dim again
with Van-ra-mar sinking.
Ioda turned to the mountains
how white and tranquil were the peaks
- they called to her.*

*She followed the steep path
walking through semi-light
and semi-shade
slowly - so slowly.*

*And then she realized
she was not alone,
a hand was holding hers
upon the left,
she glanced across
saw Ve-me walking there,
whilst on her right
her father was beside her,
and just in front
the beautiful boy and girl
striding - hand in hand.*

Ioda was tired
and must lie down,
she felt a hand
rest on her shoulder
then guide her to the earth,
she turned
- saw Mura there.

"You told me
I would see you
one more time",
Ioda said.

Yet there was no reply
- only a curious sound
made by the beautiful children.
They stretched their hands
up towards the blackening sky
they were calling
- calling for something to fall,
and then it came
in great great flakes
- fragments of blackness
- the dark snow.

