

TRANSLATING THE MUSE'S TALE

Alison was ordinary, a perfect five out of ten; nobody noticed she was pretty, nobody noticed she was plain. Vanilla-flavoured, cream-coloured, standard-sized; she put the A in average. But once upon a time, she put pen to paper and scored an A+.

Actually, it was a modern moment; with fingers to computer keyboard. She could touch-type as fast as she could think. In fact, it was a futuristic moment; with no scientific explanation for what happened next. A book came from nowhere, faster than she could think.

One minute she was sitting there wondering what to write. So many stories told already, so many different heroines, so many similar quests; how could she spin the timeless tale again? The page had been wordless for a long, long while, while she longed for the start of the thread.

Alison had made a shrine to the Muses on the hall table. A dusty lyre with nine strings, a feather pen, a comic mask and some crumbling laurel leaves were mixed up with the car keys and small change. On her desk, votive candles dripped wax into the keyboard cracks; the mouse mat was a picture of Urania, muse of science fiction. She burnt incense in the bedroom, brewed herbal tea in the kitchen and smoked drugs in the lounge, all to invoke those nine goddesses of storytelling, screenwriting and song.

As well as home worship, Alison went to evening classes; because you can't have a PhD in Creative Writing and not know where ideas come from. The same place as babies? Narnia, Nirvana, Neverland?

Every night she left a notepad and pen by the pillow in case inspiration crowned in a dream but she always found black ink written in darkness was impossible to read in the morning. Every day she walked, walked to the shops and didn't stop, wandering out of town, into the woods and up the hill to get her

head in the clouds. Dream diaries and travelogs; great tips from her writing teachers. But she always found clouds in her head, instead.

Smoking seemed to help. When Alison 'lit up' a light did come on. Inspiration: it originally meant breathing in fumes. The oracles were high on wacky gasses that seeped through cracks in their cave walls. That inky marbling in the dark was suddenly clear. One minute, she was sitting, staring at an empty page, a blank screen; then there came a whisper, not in her ear but within it, quicker than she could speak, cleverer. And the next minute she was typing at top speed to keep up, with the words dispersing like wisps of smoke:

This story is not in English. It has been translated. The original language was not French, or Latin, or German. It was not Greek, or Hebrew, or Swahili. It was not Japanese. This story is told in an alien tongue.

Don't think 'little green men', though; or we'll have to boast 'large golden women'. Don't see ET's finger underscoring these lines or we'll be forced to show you ours. Way beyond good looking, you couldn't even picture the cover. With page-turning beauty, we put the face into typeface. With best-selling style, we put the ass into classic.

This story is not in English, American or Aramaic. It is not in hieroglyphics or cuneiform. Pens don't do this kind of writing; conceived in sand with a stick, crafted in fairy dust with a wand, corrected with the hot tip of a sparkler.

It is told in a place that translates as the Real World. The setting an endless expanse of glittering pixels, written on by the moving finger; the plot humming like a spinning wheel. Your philosophers, prophets and psychics have seen it; sibyls, sirens and shamans have sung it. Tale tellers have spun it in a global web since your world first turned, and now the translation twists those multiple vocals into a single thread again.

This book is a gift; even if you bought it for yourself, it is given to you. You haven't met the translator yet, but please accept his presence.

Before she got to the bottom of the first page, Alison was feeling dizzy as a spindle, turning out the words that rattled off silently in her brain. The chant was concise, and convoluted; the narrative gushing on, longer than one page; longer than she'd written for a long time. The leads linking her computer to the mains

were charmed strings of electric blue as the volume of work channelled through. It didn't tell her in the 'how to write a novel' book, or the on-line author's forum, or the university classroom; ideas come straight from the muse's mouth.

By the top of page two, the words were coming all at once, no pausing for breath, no stopping to think. There was a voice, urgent and unique, an authorial I such as new writers aspire to (and there were voices, unguent and unquiet, such as a crazy person may hear).

Alison just wrote what was whispered or sang as she sat with fingers flying over the keyboard. She could have chiselled it in limestone or chalked it on slate but as the words scrolled down she knew what the oldest writers in the book realised. If this were ever published, her name should not be embossed on the spine.

Homer, Hesiod, Horace; scribes of the past would never have scratched their first sentence on parchment leaves without invoking Calliope or Clio, a muse for every occasion. One for comedy, one for tragedy, one for hymns, historicals, erotica; each has a special style, a particular way with the facts and the fiction.

Helicon, halcyon, hallucinogen; some of the words in this flow, Alison didn't even know what they meant. But never mind, she muttered as she typed; with heavenly voices like these, it's hard to tell divine inspiration from dictation. Habens finally got a sip from the Hippocrene spring:

You haven't met the Muses yet, but this is trickled down from their mountain source; the mythical fountain where poets drink for inspiration.

Plato, who drunk loads of it, heard what we're saying. There is a Real World that's bigger, brighter and better than yours. Our scene is set in this empyrean, empty and full of potential; an infinite beach where both the sand and the sea are moving. Against the real world's pointillist backdrop, meet Proper People; a perfect, paranormal version of yourselves. Bigger, brighter and better than you. For aliens, we're reassuringly angelic; flying without wings. But that isn't the first thing you'd notice.

Proper people never cut their umbilical cords. We don't sever the bond that binds us together, we don't snip it with the ceremonial scissors at birth. We can't. It's a lifeline between mother and child, grandchild and great-grandchild. If we cut it, we die. Not just one of us, all of us; and if it is split accidentally, we cannot stem

the flow of opalescent blood; the spill never heals. Mother and child both die, and mother's mother and child's child.

That would be the first thing you'd see, if you could see us; glowing strings. Our pearly plasma flowing through the cords connecting us so there cannot be scission.

Luckily, there are no sharp edges in the real world. Lives without knives, our family groups are physically linked, up to five generations, literally close-knit. An aged matriarch, her children, their children, great and greater grandchildren; conceivably two hundred souls, a live network of connections, cousins and aunts branching out, along the lines of a luminous tree diagram.

Because this makes us telepathic, I can tell what you're thinking. You're picturing your elderly grandmother and panicking at the thought of being attached to her by a permanent cord. Don't worry. We do die eventually; and then it's like blossom dropping off the tree so fruit can ripen. Real families are careful with their sap; re-routing the lifeblood from granny's drying petals to the dewy young buds of babies opening. Great grandma fades slowly as a flower in a vase, till she's just pollen-dust on the metaphorical mantelpiece.

Don't think babies, though; Alison stood up and stretched her arms and legs, spidery from all the writing. Stiff from her long squat in front of the buzzing box, she looked like severing the link with the extraordinary story, quitting her connection with the translator.

Tomorrow she could say it was a stupid idea, cloud-stoned by the smoke curling its signature against the sloping ceiling of her attic. Even as she wrote she was amazed, reading like you are, for the first time; even as the words flowed from her fingertips she wondered where they were coming from, what would happen next. She didn't know, any more than she knew where a baby would come from, at this point in her life.

There was a thread of lunar blue light linking her to the computer, like the tug of a future umbilical cord. The words were coming from the live end of that line of thought, making her grey fingers twitch their way back to the cardboard keyboard. She could wash up the day's supply of tea-cups, stacked in the sink, or she could sit down again at the source of a stronger stimulant and let it pour:

On the screen, my silvery voice is translated into a stream of musings on proper people tied by numinous string, whole families loosely bound together by the umbilicus. You may find it all hard to picture, but there is no running away from the facts. Remember those three-legged races you used to have at school? Now multiply it to three hundred legs. When you're a proper person there is no running away from anything; though we go fast as every word that means speed, in the 'Amphetamine, Bullet, Concorde' of the translator's dictionary.

One page ahead of you in the book, perhaps; though a bit behind in the human race. When this story starts, there are only two kinds of person in it, those we already know about; Proper People and Singalos.

Singalos can probably run faster than we can. The problem is, there aren't many places on our planet for them to go. The public spaces of the real world are designed with big families in mind; so all the important venues are sort of inside us. No rolling hills, no verdant pasture, no tranquil mead; not here. No funky downtown, no fancy uptown, no fashionable city centre; no way. We don't have rooms like they do; we walk on their walls, we dance on their ceilings. Dimensions don't do it for us; diffusion does.

So here's the scientific bit. Singalos are more physical but less practical. They look a bit like us without strings, and not glowing. They behave a bit like us. Not because they're mentally brilliant, but because they pretty much invented reading and writing, and maths and engineering, so can give the impression of brilliance. In our dreams we can be a bit like singalos; separate from our mothers and sisters, and ever so slightly able to understand numbers.

And here's the weird bit. It's not just us and them; there's you too. As far away from singalos as we are, on the other side; as alien to us as can be. Don't take it personally; sometimes you do look a bit like singalo souls but thicker, slower, less vibrant. Unattached to anyone else; and out of tune with yourself too; as you sit there tap tap tapping solidly at the black and white alphabet. The keyboard will demonstrate; a basic note, middle c, say: humanity's sound. A major third, above it; the singalo, an astral resonance. And to complete the perfect harmony, the proper person sings the dominant fifth. The chord rings though we don't know of each other's existence; at this etheric level I'm thrilling to the tone of the ultimate seventh. High C!

We are the gas of you, as it were; the unsubstantiated truth behind your solidity. And singalos, in this analogy are liquid; subject to strong physical laws but with some fluidity of spirit. Call it body, mind and soul; our three-way relationship is told in many ways. Strum a chord on the lute, and we hum the physical, emotional and mental planes; pluck it on the lyre and we pose as ego, super-ego and id. No ghosts or goddesses, though they pop-up sooner in the tale than you do.

This is a story you wouldn't believe, a plot you couldn't handle. The translation is loose, with some slippage, but there are a few safety lines; when it comes to talking with angels, the conversation is always allegorical.

So, we never cut our umbilical cords, but this does not mean that the biggest families of proper people are the best. Smaller groups sometimes have more fun. For example, I am one of a family of three. We can hold hands and dance in a circle, easily.

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My mother is called Juno, after the queen of heaven; and my sister is called Hazel, after the twigs you use for divining. My name is Angela. Actually, that's just a loose translation; but I hope it shows something of my spirit and style.

My mother is a teacher, my sister is an artist and I am a priestess. They had vocational training, but anyone can do what I do. It's a no-brainer. Basically, I sit in the big black hole where my head would be if I were human. I just watch the darkness and listen to the silence inside me. This sounds like nothing, but it's really something; because in that empty space the Gods are found.

We have three Gods, a trinity of infinity; but only two of their names are known. The third is still a secret. One is Him, one is Her; the other has never been uttered. Ladies and gentleman, may I translate Lee and Sheela. He and She are le and la; the male and female primary signifiers. More jolly than Jupiter and Jain, more sexy than Shakti and Shiva. Plus, they conjure up images of an Asian man and an Australian woman so that wherever you live on your diverse continents, Lee and Sheela are sure to appeal.

Imagine the joy of working for this couple; him so compact and fiery, her so liquid and lithe. When I open a channel to the Gods, the current of power I receive is strong enough to build my church, to raise a magnificent steeple on the flat plain of our existence.

There's no real art in my church, no painted transept or gilded chancel, so I have to produce it artificially, with the force of my feeling. In this church-space, my mother and sister kneel on either side of me. Hands together, eyes closed, but they're not as devout as I am. Theirs is mindless prayer, converging to lift my thoughts high as a cathedral ceiling; arch concentration, with flashes of inspiration like light through stained-glass windows.

We spend a third of our time like this. The other two thirds are shared between my sister, for practising and performing her art; and my mother, for teaching her class. While each of us works, the other two rest, sitting peacefully, heads bent, eyes shut; but we're not sleeping. Though deeply relaxed, we're fully aware of everything that is said and sung.

We never sleep, except at parties, when everyone sleeps together. And church is much more exciting than that. Once a good God-high kicks in, extraordinary things can happen. For example, I'm just about to receive a premonition. I know it's going to be a premonition, because I've had it before.

Kneeling at the altar of the future, I draw deeply on my family. Juno and Hazel drop further into their trances as the church pillars rise up around us like candle flames or laser beams. Our awareness heightens with these columns, till the glowing dome grows into place over our heads and the whole space rings like a gong; announcing the start of the supernatural experience.

Someone is coming to see me. I've sensed her approach for ages, been waiting for her visit forever. In my premonition, the singalo girl appears at the church doors on her hands and knees. I know she'd rather be standing, she's proud and independent; but my soul vibration is so much faster than hers she is unable to balance in my company. As she crawls up the aisle towards me I make a conscious effort to slow my body rhythm down, to establish a more neutral beat, or else we'll never be able to understand each other; like a Jamaican meeting a Japanese.

She only gets as far as the font. The water in it is not wet enough for her to go further. She seems to be what you would call pissed, but that's because she exists in a different dimension.

"I've been expecting you," I say. She looks up at me and her face is familiar; as if I've had this premonition before.

"Do you know why I've come?" she asks. Or is it "I'm coming"?

I shake my head, carefully so as not to shatter the pulpit-spell of this prediction.

"I'm spreading the word," she says.

"What word?" I ask.

The singalo voice is slurred.

"Here to tell you, oh pinpointed one of three," she says. "But listen, it cannot be said aloud, only whispered quietly in an individual ear."

"I am not an individual," I reply.

The singalo rests her head against the cold stone of my font.

"I know, but just come here so I can whisper it to you," she says wearily.

There is no way in the Real World that I, my mother Juno and my sister Hazel would go down the aisle to talk to the singalo girl. Even if this were real life and not just a premonition, we aren't capable of that approach. The three of us could never walk up to a single person, in a million years.

That's the next thing to know about us. From romantic entanglements to professional networking, our social interactions are all based on numbers. It isn't possible for a family of proper people to visit one smaller than itself. A group of eight would not be able to swan up to a group of six, but the family of six could sidle towards the family of eight. It's due to the polarity of our personalities, the pull of our combined souls.

We've got the power; and that's why a quirky singalo girl will never come close enough to fulfil a prophecy with me. Shame, because I'm intrigued by all her kind; though most of us are prejudiced against them. Endless stories account for singalo creation, myths about their position and purpose in the real world. Their history is more interesting than ours; because we can remember a time before it began.

Let's translate a little, shall we? And, in case you want to hear the Muses singing, we'll do it in blank verse:

Once upon a time two families met
in a head-on collision on the plain;
both dazzled by the mist that moves across
the iridescent surface of our globe,
and dazed by the myriad spinning motes
of prairie dust from which our world is balled.
The casualties were quickly healed with
treatment proper people know how to give;
the cure is like a laying on of hands.
Minor cuts and slight abrasions were
soon made better with a loving touch, but
serious ailments took a little more
telekinesis to fix. Working side
by side in a make-shift field hospital,
a girl from one family caught the eye
of a young man from the opposing clan;
the force they should have employed inwardly,
to surge along the phosphorescent cord
joining them to their injured relatives
was sent outwards instead, to forge a link
between the fated pair of star-crossed mates.
In all the chaos their connection went
unnoticed, but when other wounds were healed
two families shook hands and said "goodbye,
nice to meet you, we must fly," for they had
opposite directions to take in the
endlessly unfolding Real World.

Imagine how dismayed they were to find themselves straining to go their separate ways; however firm they pushed or gently pulled, whether they struggled or tried to relax, the families couldn't ease themselves apart.

The accident was graver than it seemed, but two victims were whispering in glee. We'll call them Romeo and Juliet; it doesn't really matter which is which,

because it was impossible to tell the silly things apart once they had got their umbilical cords in such a knot.

This hitch in their strings could not be undone,
it bound them, tied them, tighter than a
screw. Their parents, cousins, uncles and aunts
had to stay together too. It cut the
circulation off, and everyone knew
the love affair was terminal, except
R and J whose death throes begot Jr.
So while their families faded away
from cord-rot, the lover's knot was like a
tourniquet, concentrating the flow
of blood to the first ever Singalo.

That's the myth; but scientifically, it's impossible. How can their entire species have descended from a single soul, severed from all family connections in a fluke accident; a freak attraction?

Ours is the proper way to have babies, of course. Yours is a literal version, bone squeezed through bone, tight-rimmed with skin. But singalo reproduction is unique; each of them the one-off product of an unrepeatable meeting that wasn't even planned.

My mother teaches this kind of thing, to a family of thirty, and as soon as church is over for the day it's time for her class. So as the ringing in my tower fades to the sound of the school bell, we head towards them. On the way, I'll tell you the first fact we found out about you.

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You smell. I don't mean to be rude, but your odour is so strong we can see it. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between the female and the furniture, all so crudely hewn from raw materials. Smell is the only way we can be sure that you're the central character, the table's a prop and the chairs are padding. That carpet smells of a hundred cats' piss, those cushions smell of a hundred curry

spills; but we can see it seeping from you, too, with the iridescence of gasoline, the neon of a bar sign. Half your language is written in smell. It's a wonder you can't see it yourselves.

Don't mean to be rude, indeed. Alison tossed her head angrily as she wrote, flicking the scent of tobacco and coconut spiked with hairspray that could get a human being high.

It's bad enough when there's just one; but we're also getting it from her friends in the downstairs flat; good name, that, for its wooden backdrop to the housemate action. They don't need to sniff aerosols, though; there's other substance abuse going on between their four paisley-swirling walls. Two boys and a girl, mildly self-medicated on coffee, cava, cannabis; despite being health professionals. (And even their wallpaper has a smell; imagine parchment stiffly unrolled to reveal the word 'quintessence' written on it, in mustard and mayonnaise.) Up a level, Alison's peeling paint job smells only of aniseed and artist-sweat.

She stopped writing, not taken with my saucy tone. After a minute, according to the clock whose ticks smelled of sticky toffee, she got up. Scuffing the pong of dog poo and field mushroom across the carpet, she walked to the kitchen and made tea; brewing the same musky, meaty aroma in a white china tea-cup; the only things on your planet that don't smell in themselves.

Pacing while the kettle boiled, she tried to make the next line more flattering, but the wannabe author deals in cliches; the smell comes off us like colours off a flower, scales off a fish, blades off freshly mown grass. It splashes all around us like the first rain on pavements after a long, hot spell; it rises above us like new-baked bread. That's what she said, but as she sat down at the desk again, her actions spoke louder: she farted like a whoopee cushion.

And as I look down my heavenly nose at your world in translation, it seems that your existence is virtually without grace; but I do have to admit, the way you move on those two legs is pretty cool.

You've probably realised by now that proper people can't walk very well. You've pictured yourself tied to ten of your relatives, trying to make your way down the high street. You've imagined it, inch by stumbling inch. Luckily we have a less pedestrian way of covering the fathomless distances of our existence.

Proper people can fly.

It's not just that we can fly; we must. One of the main aims of family life is for everybody to get off the ground at the same time. Driven by the quest for a simultaneous orgasm, you will appreciate the difficulty. It takes something akin to this to get us all into the air, but not like your earthly climax, where the direction is downward, grounded; the dust to dust of sexual reproduction. For flying, the flow of feeling is reversed. The charge starts in what could loosely be called our nether regions and works its way upwards, where it has to reach everybody's heads at the same time. Our lives depend on the synchronisation of pulse and impulse.

If a family can't fly, they die. If they can't move through space, their space stagnates; the energy around them clots, and the energy inside them is blocked. They stop living long before they die, which is the worst thing that can happen to anyone, regardless of what planet they come from.

I once saw such a tragedy befall a great family of fifty, who were unable to get themselves off the ground. It started with a squabble between two of its members, a small matter that, afterwards, no one could recall. Rumour was the row had been about nothing at all. But the effect on the group was devastating. Three times they tried to rise into the air, and failed. With each attempt they grew more worried; wondering if they'd lost the knack. And as soon as enough of them believed they would never fly again, it became true.

Their matter was heavier than their minds. The cords between them tightened into painful constraints, as their weight increased and their depression deepened. Everyone rallied round and tried to help; artists, teachers, priests, flying therapists, but all to no avail. The family were bringing themselves down. It was a vicious circle, a downward spiral of decline. We watched helplessly as the spirit of translucent fluidity reached a state of static fat. It took ages for the family to die. Surgeons started cutting them free of each other, like fat fingers released from too-tight wedding bands once slipped on so lightly; not in the hope of saving them, but to speed up the end.

My family of three take off with ease; and once we're in the air, the earth moves. That's just a turn of phrase I've borrowed from yourselves, of course. We fly upright, arms outstretched, the cords between us taut and tingling. The sensation of movement is more within us than without, so long as the eyes are closed.

Flying with the eyes open is frowned upon in our culture, much as drug taking is in yours. It's seen as a short cut, the cheat's way to enlightenment. Everyone does it though, and a priestess may be as culpable as the next person. One gets a whole new perspective on things when one flies with the eyes open.

We're not actually moving at all, you see. We're still, suspended in space, spread-eagled in fixated bliss; while hallucinated scenery whizzes past.

"I wish you two wouldn't do that," Mum murmurs. She never opens her eyes when she flies, just meditates upon her body's graceful glide.

Hazel and I glance at each other, funny frozen starfishes, with hair standing on end.

"It's alright," I gasp. "Everyone does it."

"No they don't," says Mum.

"There's no harm in it." My sister's fixed expression doesn't alter as she speaks.

"We don't know that for a fact," says Mum. "There could be new scientific evidence, just around the corner."

In this state, the thought of anything being just around the corner is hilarious. We're straight-lining. There are no bends.

But coming down is a bit bumpy. As we alight near Juno's class of thirty I tell myself she's right, she's the teacher, and we're really not designed to fly with our eyes open. She is fresh from the trip, serene and supremely intelligent, ready to instruct the youngsters in the ways of our world. Hazel and I, however, stagger on the landing.

The leader of the family holds her arms out to us. She's a wonderful old woman, so wizened she's the size of the three year olds at the other end of her family chain. So old they call her Hellenic, a really ancient Greek; but sprightly in her insubstantial toga.

"You look tired, dears," she says to me and Hazel, holding out withered bougainvillea hands, to draw us into the group.

"They've been flying with their eyes open again," Juno smiles ruefully.

"It'll never get you anywhere," the old lady chuckles. "I can understand a young artist being seduced by illusion," she says to Hazel, "but a priestess needs to search for the truth." She gives me a piercing stare.

As soon as Juno starts to teach, I sink gratefully into a trance. My last thought is a fervent promise to close my eyes when I fly; and then I'm floating in the collective consciousness, flowering in the wordless awareness, drifting into the safety of the net. Twenty adults give their minds willingly to help Mum teach the children.

Our curriculum is like yours with a few changes. What you call science for us falls somewhere between history and mystery. What you call history for us is art and craft: because time is the glue that holds everything together.

The way you see it, time is moving in a straight line, at exactly the pace you walk down the high street. You can only pop into one shop after another; you can't be in all of them at once.

For us, the basic fact is that we exist in the butcher's and the baker's shop at the same time; and the first lesson we learn is, the street ain't the only way to get from the shoe shop to the sweet shop. So while you study economics, we are free to enjoy life after life after life without running out of currency.

For us, the proof of our endless reincarnation is found in primary school, where the youngest children teach ancient civilization. You may sneer at this because, on your planet, the passing of time is kept by learned old men in creaking textbooks. In your libraries there is little evidence of life after death. Proper people learn more about the past from their new-born babies than the creaky old men, who are apt to forget.

And this is why my mother starts the 'history' lesson with 'herpoetry':

Children wiser than the elders
older than them you have been
close your eyes and in the darkness
wake the third eye that has seen
where we go as dear departed
at the end of each life's dream

Listen only to my voice and
let it lead you like a light
down the tunnel to a place that
you can see with second sight

visualise the life before this
bright as your life now is bright

With these words, Juno is wrapping a blanket of educational material around the children. As a teacher, her first concern is for safety; she knows a little knowledge can be dangerous.

Trust me as I hypnotise you
know that I am kind and meek
You've designed the learning process
already seen the truth you seek
and you will truly understand it
as soon as you start to speak

"Please Miss," says a little girl.

"Yes," replies Juno gently.

"I can see..." the girl says falteringly.

She's very young; her hair is long and still getting longer. As there are no knives or scissors in our lives, we never cut the flowing locks that grow like thoughts from our heads; but, at a certain point, exactly halfway through our time in the real world, our hair starts to get shorter again.

So, though the child's waves are waist-length, and tied with ribbon; mine swings around my shoulders without restraint. Hazel still uses what you'd call a headband, to keep the thoughts out of her eyes; but Juno now tucks a bob neatly behind her ears, and Hellenic has a classic granny perm. Hers is platinum; the little girl's is gold.

"Go on, Galatea," Mum prompts her. "Tell us what you see."

And the lesson begins as the girl describes herself in a previous life.

"I'm a priestess, sitting at the altar, but... but..." Galatea pauses. "There are only two Gods. There is only Lee and Sheela."

The schoolgirl speaks hesitantly. She's sure her vision must be wrong; and it's not surprising. There have been three Gods for a million years; though that big number just means a lot of nothing to us. As far back as anyone can remember, there have been three Gods. But once upon a time there were only two.

It's probably the biggest change our society has ever seen. We're not like you. We haven't been fiddling around with an industrial revolution, faffing about with motor cars and TV trivia. We don't find what we're looking for with magnifying glasses and nylon net curtains.

"Galatea," Mum speaks quietly, but I can hear the excitement in her voice, "tell us more. What did you do, as a two-deity priestess?"

"Prayed," says Galatea, "prayed a lot. When it was just the pair of them we weren't sure if they could hear us. They were absorbed in each other. "

"Didn't they send you a sign?" says Mum.

"No," says Galatea firmly, "only ambiguous symbols."

"Like what?" says Mum.

"Crosses, horseshoes, rings and things..."

"Fascinating," says Juno. "So listen everyone. In the olden days, there was only the Godfather and the Godmother. "

A little boy voices the inevitable question.

"How did they get the Godchild?" He's Kosmas, the girl's cousin; the image of her, but younger, with shorter hair. It's more coppery and stands on end, like all men's hair, until it flops in middle-age.

"Well, nobody knows for sure how it happened," says Mum.

"Oh look," says Galatea. "I can see it now. The smoke! The smoke!"

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Despite our love of physics, we are not physical beings like you. We don't do the physical things that you do. We don't eat, drink, have sex or exercise. We do, however, smoke. It is one of our greatest pleasures.

Imagine a sunrise with yourself as the sun. Picture the Botticelli-beautiful clouds; pink, gold and breathtaking blue, but don't put them on a distant horizon. Let them surround you.

Each inhalation enhances the climactic conditions. Normally we don't have weather at all; we never feel hot or cold or get wet, except in dreams. Nothing changes, nothing physically affects us, like smoke. At its height the pleasure is almost unbearable. People have been temporarily blinded by their own light,

dazzled by the silver lining. We call it the Holy Smoke, and it's where ideas come from.

With ground-breaking, epoch-making revelations the smoke comes over us once in ten lifetimes, roughly. And roughly ten smokes ago was when Lee first met Sheela. Before that there may have only been one god. The last smoke was when proper people stopped fearing singalos. Before that, we wouldn't have mingled; even in conversation. The first recorded smoke was the one which cleared to reveal the difference between male and female souls. We learnt about this from the infant professors in my mother's class; those baby PhDs taught us how people all seemed the same before. One day they might show us who came first, Lee or Sheela, Him or Her.

I've never smoked but have always wanted to. If I'm this enlightened as a plain priestess, how perfect would a mouthful of the almighty incense make me. How sweet would my Vespers be; 'imagine a sunset with yourself as the sun'. I have heard it whispered that smoking can make singalos immortal. That's pretty strong stuff. And the whisperers themselves are addicted; never mind dancing in a circle while the clouds form ominous songs and portentous stories. The Muses are chain smokers. The poets are secondary smokers.

In our language the words for both Force and Source translate into yours as Holy Smoke.

"Can you still see it, Galatea?" my mother asks.

"I'm in it."

"What does it look like?"

"It's looking at me," says the little girl cheekily.

"I saw it too," her cousin, Kosmas, says. "I was an old man; my bald pate lit up like a match head."

"Look at the molten metal highlights of my hairdo," she trumps.

"I died soon after," the old man is resolute. "But what a way to go."

"What a way to come," Galatea answers back. "When the smoke cleared we realised that the Godchild had been born."

"How did you know this?" asks Juno.

"Because people who had never been to church were suddenly singing hymns, engraving images, raising pillars to the third God. The height of our steeples knew no limits, now we were sure Lee and Sheela were really up there."

"And that," says Juno, as she gently prepares to bring the class out of their trance, "was truly a lesson in enlightenment." Proper school teachers never say what the class is about until it is nearly over.

As an artist, my sister's main aim is to capture the effect of the Holy Smoke; to imitate its beauty and attempt to solve its mystery. This is not an easy task for someone who has never experienced the phenomenon; not in this lifetime and, as far as Hazel can recall, in none of her previous incarnations either.

But even if she had witnessed it first hand, Hazel's art could only be a grab to catch the smoke in a gilded frame. A characterless scripting of that whose name is not in any language. The seed of our tongue, which only refers back to itself; like an acorn may point to an oak, but at the end of the gesture, at the end of the bough, is only another acorn.

"The art v reality debate," my sister always sniffs. "A painting of a tree v a real tree. One smells of paint. The other smells of pine and you can hear its leaves rustling in the wind."

"But you can rustle a leaf of paper," I sometimes interrupt her.

"Words, Angela. Not real." Hazel is a visual artist. She was trained to bend rainbows with her mind. It's a strenuous activity; physical like your sport, but prettier. With a single colour she can flex a whole area of our lives. Great strength of beauty-muscle is required. Purple is her speciality; not many people can clench that colour. It's considered very daring.

Yellow and orange are easy choices, natural variations of our seasons. Just breathing in and out is yellow; sighing and sweating is orange; the stuff that happens every day, year in and year out, at the obvious end of the spectrum.

Red is harder to do, but it's very popular. We go red all the time. Anger, embarrassment, passionate love: it's the stuff that most of our art is made of. But purple moves beyond this, into a hazy realm. Purple is a place of sensual touch, something we tend to be strangers to, being essentially intangible.

But hear this; colour is audible. There's a kind of blue that screams like a violin's top E. A yellow that winces like a flute's C Sharp. Several shades of brown to describe a trombone sliding down the B Flat Minor scale. Every colour has a sound, its own musical accompaniment; and my sister's sonic purple has just been number one, top of the pops.

It was an impromptu performance for a family of fifty; an informal concert, just a little soiree to honour the Muse of music, Euterpe. Warming up with yellow and orange, hotting up with red, building up to purple, when the audience freaked out. A family of thirty happened along and stopped to listen, then two groups of sixty nearby heard too and came nearer; and soon the box office smashed.

There was an amazing atmosphere. Everyone was holding hands, inasmuch as we have hands; and psychedelic art was growing from the fringes of the huge crowd, pink crochets and quavers against a purple sky, pulsating in time to the music. (The closest translation we can get to this is Woodstock; but isn't that, like, a pile of logs for the fire?)

After that exponential gathering, my sister talked about trying for blue. No one but me has ever clapped eyes on it, inasmuch as we have eyes. I saw it in church when I was a little girl; just a glimpse, but enough to persuade me that I wanted to be a priestess. Proper people say it is only through spiritual advancement that you reach blue; and once you get there, you can't go back. So, though I'd love her to try for it, I don't think she should. A painter may create the effect of religion, but only a preacher can recreate its cause.

Anyway, Hazel has a regular gig, working as an art therapist at a Home for Distressed Singalos.

*

Dong! Alison paused, fingers poised on the keyboard (Dong) as midnight struck in her attic flat. Dong. She never usually worked as late as this. Dong. The muse was really with her this evening (Dong) but what a mad story she had to tell. Dong. Actually, there were no chimes, no Big Ben within human earshot. She knew it was midnight because of a digital bleep from deep in her desk drawer, where a cheap watch kept time in the darkness; and downstairs her housemates got back from the late-shift at the hospital where they worked.

Alison was normally in bed by now, but a fever was on her and the writing sprung like mythic sweat. She flicked a flame to lick at another cigarette, then inhaled it like the smoke of a helicon bonfire; or the fumes from a sibyl's cave. In the flat below, she heard them noisily going to bed; the uninhibited nocturnes of

professional carers, stripping their uniforms off like identity peel at the end of the day.

A home for distressed singalos might be like the disabled ward her friends from downstairs worked in, Alison wondered. It would have the clanging wrought-iron gates of a Victorian workhouse, and the civic glass doors of political correctness: because these days being a singalo doesn't automatically make you distressed. Puffing out a lungful of dirty smoke, the novelist peered through the screen, as the sliding doors of her story opened on the next instalment.

Normally, proper people have no need for doors but the Singalo Centre is marked by a definite portal. Meant to be entered one by one, Juno, Hazel and I fly up to it in our standard web formation; so getting inside is always a bit sticky. In the entrance hall, one of its inhabitants is spinning on the spot. Her name is Dot. She is small, with raw, unfinished features. Her voice is scratchy, cracking on her lips like the rough edges of sound.

"They didn't even bother to say hello," she is shouting.

"Hello Dot," we say.

"Do you want to hear me swearing?" she demands.

"No thanks Dot," we reply.

"They didn't even bother to hear me swearing," she screams in her tortured monotone, spinning more vehemently as we pass her by.

She says the same thing every day. Last time we came, dazed from flying with the eyes open, I said yes, we would like to hear her swearing. She changed the subject then. Secretly, I think she doesn't know how to swear.

The home is run by a family of social workers. There are seven of them, ages ranging from young adult to late middle-age, but they have no children attached, which makes them ideal for the job. They get casual help from singalo carers; some of whom were once distressed themselves.

In the home's central space, a day room, the staff are trying to get everyone into a circle. Some of the residents cannot walk unaided. Then they use things you might call 'mental wheelchairs', mobility devices controlled by the imagination; not always practical for singalos of an unstable nature to drive.

As we arrive, a social worker is trying to talk a resident down from the ceiling, where he is clinging for dear life to an out of control wheelchair in the form of an inflatable rubber dinosaur.

"Look at that," says Hazel, in amazement. "It's bright green."

Now, green is beyond the range of artists and priestesses alike. Green is something that we can only dream of. It cannot be painted, it cannot be sung, it cannot be summoned up in religious ecstasy. Yet these distressed singalos are producing green without even thinking about it.

I look around. Green is everywhere. An old man is rocking backwards and forwards; and the traces of his movements, the after-images of each position are in green. All the women sitting in the circle are doing what you might see as knitting, without needles, without wool; obsessive hand movements making an endless blanket of green between them.

Then there's a young man, who doesn't actually look handicapped at all, but as I stare at him, trying to work out what his problem is, I suddenly realise he is staring back at me with beautiful green eyes.

Green eyes? I drop my gaze abruptly to the crux of his matter, to his crutch, I mean the crossing point of him between two perfectly healthy-looking singalo legs; then back to his face in a split second. He winks.

I look away again, and watch the head social worker trying to guide a distressed singalo called Pat down from above on his wayward dinosaur.

"Think of some handles, some nice easy-grip handles," the Head is calling. All Pat's got to hold onto at the moment are rubbery horns, marbled in greens from jade to sage. He suffers from a weird singalo thing called Up Syndrome, which means that he often needs to be coaxed down from the ceiling.

"Go back to the beginning and start again, mate," says the head social worker. "Conjure up a new mobility image for yourself, but keep it safe: a moving platform or a magic carpet."

Before we know it, Pat Crash is mounted on an electric lawn mower, and heading fast in the opposite direction.

"Help!" he calls, over his shoulder. One of the singalo staff, the man with viridescent eyes, runs after him.

The rest of the group are assembled calmly now, sitting in a circle and already starting to trance. They love their art therapy sessions. Hazel smiles and begins to sing.

As an artist, my sister is a source of beauty. You would see her, in her natural state, as yellow: you would see buttercups and honey; daffodils and saffron, brass and brimstone; canaries, primroses and mustard. You would see sun shining on topaz and gold.

You'd probably have to look away. Your colours aren't as bright as ours. But if you can bear it, keep watching till the embers, when amber takes over and orange is dominant. Relax and enjoy the marigold and marmalade, apricot and copper, ginger and tangerine.

Then brace yourselves to blush, feel florid, be ruddy; as my sister leads you further into her exhibition of art. By now, it's beyond your control. You are under the influence of port and poppy, claret and cherry, strawberry and ruby. You're marooned, bleeding, on crimson lake. Incarnadine, you lose consciousness.

But the music goes on. Hazel is still singing. Where words and pictures, the stuff of other art, fail; music succeeds. There are no trees in music; it is not a representation of anything else. Its notes are not excuses, apologies for the absence of reality. It's present, and it physically touches the parts of us nothing else can reach; not hands like yours, not hands like ours.

Music is the meeting of time and space. It is the condition of our existence. It is there at our birth, announcing us, delivering us. It is what shows us the way when we die. It leads us a merry dance from life to life, signposting the direction of our travels: but only between lives, and during art therapy sessions, do we stop and rest and really listen to the music.

It is totally logical, consistently meaningful, unlike English or any of your Earth languages. If I could have told this story in music, transposed it instead of translating it, I would have: but that's already been done. Wherever there are spheres turning, my plot is already defined, my characters are already described. Whenever a person starts to sing, they are joining in a song that is already going on in the universe. They can sing in any key and still be in tune with it.

Here in the Home for Distressed Singalos, everyone is singing (not all in the same sense of the word) but no-one is distressed. Some people are lying

down, in a state of extended bliss; and some are sitting and swaying with musical pleasure.

The rhythm is quickening as we reach purple. Hazel says, telepathically I think, "Oh wow!"

Lavender and amethyst, that's where we're at now. Lilac and violet, penis-tip and bacon, heliotrope and hyacinth. Imagine your head spinning as my sister's voice starts to rise above the general chanting of the group. There's a chord ringing in the cords that join us to each other; and so powerful and complete is our harmony that it's forging new links between us, the singalos and the family of social workers. Above the mutual concordance, Hazel is singing a solo. It isn't rehearsed, she sings a new one every time; but this one seems more novel than most.

The translator thinks we made a pretty good job of translating it. It wasn't easy. Some of the key concepts in our language don't unlock any door in yours; and we had to study you hard in order to come up with some alternative ideas. So while it is a long way from a literal translation, the translator says it is close to the spirit of the original.

Imagine it sung in a pure purple voice that can penetrate your being with a deep therapeutic point.

Violet, as an old lady,
sucks talcum powder sweets
and waves a pale hanky
in her lace-skinned, vein-embroidered hand,
that wafts the same perfume.

Violet, menopausal,
whose underwear stains fade from red to blue
sits on a mood swing, grimly thinking
the next time someone brings her flowers
will be her funeral.

Violet, the teenager,
wears eponymous eyeshadow

and a steely skirt which shifts over her thighs,
concealing the site of her first
violent motorbike rides.

Violet, as a child,
dips her imperial paintbrush in a pot of colour
and creates another fantasy landscape
instead of making friends with her classmates.

Violet, as a child,
hides her face in a book,
and finds at the end of the rainbow
realms of colour the naked eye can't see;
Ultra-violet is on a different frequency.

Violet, as an old lady,
threads the colour of her veins
through the steely needles
of her still-moving fingers
and sews a story which only
Violet, as a child, can read,
in the light of Ultra-violet.

Violet, in her late twenties,
doesn't wear a watch,
but is advised by her body clock
that the time is right.

"That was for you," my sister says, when we've come down through all the
colours, ending on a mellow buttercup'n'honey buzz, back at the Centre for
Distressed Singalos.

"For me?" I say. "I don't think so."

"Why not?" my mother asks.

"It wasn't specific enough," I say. "It could have been for anyone there. It should have been for Hazel."

"Darling, trust me," Mum says. "It was for you."

"You were glowing the brightest," my sister insists. "You were ultra-violet. She was, wasn't she Mum?"

"Yes," Juno laughs gleefully. "It's finally started."

"No!" I cry.

"Yes," she says. "This is a definite case of UTR."

No! UTR means the Urge to Reproduce. I don't know if you abbreviate it like this, so let me explain fully.

Only women get the Urge to Reproduce. It starts with a Maternity Message, which is usually a bolt from the blue. Messages take many different forms, but they are impossible to miss, especially if one is aimed at you. It can happen when you are least expecting it, though with hindsight you realise that the tension had been mounting for ages.

My sister's song is a classic example of the onset of UTR. Its feminine themes, framed in a Russian doll-like structure, are a big give-away. I would still argue that it's aimed at Hazel, but she is the author and she says it's all about me.

There's no arguing with a maternity message, once you've worked out who it's meant for. The symptoms of UTR set in straightaway and the victim is completely at their mercy. The woman is compelled to mate with a man, whose identity is made known to her in a follow-up message.

One of the best I've ever heard of happened at a party, when a pretty flamingo suddenly flew in through the patio doors. To a disco beat the pink bird did a fertility dance, scattering rose petals everywhere. On each petal was painted the faces of the man and woman, complete strangers before that evening, who were destined to mate. They were celestial business cards, edged in gold sweat.

This might sound far fetched to you, who act, a lot of the time, as if babies are born by accident. But you know there's always a stork involved somewhere. I must admit, it sounds inconceivable to me too: but it's the way we reproduce, round these parts.

"So who's the lucky man then?" my mother says, or words to that effect.

"I don't know, do I?"

"Perhaps," my sister trills, "we'll find out at the party tonight."

Proper people get ready to go to parties in much the same way as you do, metaphorically. We wash our hair and wear our best clothes, in a manner of speaking. We even put make up on, but not in any way you could imagine in a million years. What makes a rose pink; what makes a lipstick pink? That's the difference between me putting on my make-up and you putting on yours.

*

This is going to be a wild party. It's still early, but people are already starting to fall asleep. Whole families are nodding off, and dragging everyone else down with them. The crowd is drowsy. Juno, Hazel and I land on the edge of its etherized mountain range, stretched out on the table of our endless plains. Curvaceous in the yellow fog, these patients yawn.

"Hey!" I say, "this is really happening!"

Looking around, I gasp aloud. Not as loud as you would, because there isn't a whisper of air. When Proper people are surprised we become invisible for an instant. When I gasp, I disappear and then appear again.

"Let's mingle," my sister says.

We move among the families, smiling as we recognise the sleepy faces of friends. Mum is heading rapidly towards the centre of the crowd. She's a bit of a swinger at parties and she knows you get the best effects in the middle. I feel a thrill of excitement as I wander behind her, wondering what this dream will bring. But it's hard to reach the softest part of the party. The snoozing on the outskirts turns to slumber further in and our passage is clumsy.

"Hello!" I say, as we stumble past some members of my congregation, almost comatose. "See you at church in the morning!"

They gulp, and I grimace knowingly. Sleeping all night then getting up for morning service is notoriously hectic. It is not unheard of for the pillars to wobble or the font to be bloodshot.

When we can penetrate the crowd no further, we come to a stop alongside a family who are great friends of ours. They are already deeply somnolent.

"This looks like a good spot," says Mum. "Let's start here."

We sit down, giggling. The tendrils of sleep are tickling. The whole 'losing consciousness' thing is beginning, and it feels like we're in for a wonderful evening. Then Mum gets mischievous.

"Touch them," she says. "Touch the Kennedys."

"No," my sister and I say together.

"Go on, you'll drop off quicker," urges Mum.

"But we like it slow," I reply.

"Suit yourselves," Mum grins, and grabs Ray Kennedy by the ankle. We hear her last words telepathically; 'When I was your age I liked it slow too, but now I can't get there fast enough,' then insensibility overcomes her, and her head sinks.

You may find it funny that someone so firmly against flying with the eyes open, isn't opposed to using artificial methods of falling asleep more quickly. Funny that even a highly advanced species like ourselves can be prey to petty social prejudices. Funny in a bitter way, not how Thalia, Muse of comedy, would sweeten the plot.

With Juno safely over the other side of sleep, Hazel and I can relax and enjoy the bridge. We suspend our state of tiredness, string out the ride; swinging from the languor to the lassitude that span the chasm of unconsciousness.

I wish I could explain how nice it feels. You could feel it for yourself, if only you stayed awake long enough. But you always fall asleep a moment too soon, even when you've stayed up writing for hours; burning the fuse of your imagination at both ends. Hazel and I hang on as long as possible, but we can't hold on forever. Shortly we are losing our grip on the rope, and slipping down the deliciously greasy slope to sleep.

This is going to be a wild party. The dream is well underway. Madge and Mavis Kennedy rush up to me; clouds of feather-pillow hair, barely restrained by ribbons or lace, billowing in my face. There's a luscious fur carpet beneath my bare feet. Then the girls put their arms, in silk gloves to the elbows, around me; and their long pearl necklaces bounce against my shoulders, in a strapless gown, as I'm drawn onto the dance floor. Now my soles slap on its cool surface.

You thought our parties weren't as good as yours. All these so-called Proper People do is fall asleep, you were thinking; while at Earth parties we dance, get pissed, talk crap, do unspeakable things to each other's bodies, and

then fall asleep. You didn't know that, for us, falling asleep is only the beginning. I wake up with a bang on the other side of unconsciousness. Everyone else from my world is there too. Rubbing up against each other on the dance floor, playing footsie on the bar stools, necking in the little stuccoed alcoves off this sensational ballroom. That's why our dreams are parties. When we're awake, we can feel but we can't touch. At parties we get physical.

In the light of the chandeliers, everyone is in silhouette, dancing to the drums. There must be a hundred drummers, with congas and bongos, tabla and tambourines. Me, Madge and Mavis form a circle. Thighs brush against each other, hands hold hands, arms are flung around necks. Deep in the crowd, everyone is getting into their own bodies. We're only humanoid, after all. But for you, the sense of touch is old hat. You've been there, done that, and these days you're more into virtual reality.

Alison's fingers slipped off the keyboard. They were getting sweaty. She relit the cigarette that had gone out in the ashtray. Squinting through the yellow fog at the last few lines on the screen she was surprised by the bossy outpouring; having written nothing for ages then twenty pages in a single sitting her voice was spring-fresh as Angela's diatribe continued:

We can only dance in our dreams the way you can only fly in yours. It feels totally extravagant, highly improbable but deeply gratifying to be popping these moves. To be covered in skin, that's so smooth. And oh, to have a hole to put drinks in. After dancing till we're sweaty and panting, the Kennedy girls and I go off in search of liquid refreshment; for in our dreams we can actually partake.

Imagine champagne made from strawberries, or stout fortified with lion's blood. A tea blended with peach blossom, or chocolate-flavoured coffee. Imagine what you like; it's all the same to me. I don't know how any of these taste, I just devised them to tickle your buds, based on my limited understanding of your beverage preferences. Just imagine your dream drink, and know it's what I'm drinking too.

There's a bar, and it's buzzing, but no one ever has to tell the bar staff what they want. Busy as they are, the bar staff already know. Mavis and Madge and I wait till a smiling young man in a waistcoat brings us our order. For me, there is what you'd call an alcoholic milkshake; potent as a trickle of liquor round your arctic circle. Mavis drinks something called Liquid Sunshine, which is similar

to your orange juice but actually on fire. Madge's drink is so sparkling it barely stays in the glass. Instead, she has to snort it, quickly before it effuses out.

We mentally order another round at once; and behind the bar the smiling young man whips up three more nuclear reactions in his cocktail shaker. And to show our parties are not so different to yours, we're getting drunk and talking loudly.

"I hear you've had a Maternity Message," says Mavis.

"Who told you that," I ask.

"Juno," says Madge.

"She had no right to," I reply. "We're not certain yet."

"Touchy!" says Mavis. "It must be the UTR."

If I'm touchy it's because this is a dream, and feeling is foregrounded. I'm in a party mood. Metaphorically, I'm wearing a beaded ball gown; and am overwhelmed by it brushing against my body every time I move.

But I feel no need to reproduce. I'm quite happy with my current status; self-contained, at the end of the family line. I don't want to have a child attached to me, a whole new person dangling from an umbilical cord to match the one that attaches me to my mother. The dream feeling, a sense of detachment from any relatives, is becoming more real by the moment.

You have noticed, haven't you, that I woke up separated from my family? You did realise, didn't you, that since this dream started, there hasn't been a single sighting of Juno or Hazel? Maybe not, because it's normal for you; you always go to parties on your own.

This one is held in what you would call a great house. Like a stately home, it has a huge entrance hall, overhung with chandeliers; and a sweeping staircase to the upper floors. My mother is waving at me from the landing. I wave back. We always meet up sooner or later, in dreams. I slap lipstick kisses on Mavis and Madge's rouged cheeks by way of my goodbyes. It's strange how even when I get the chance to strike out on my own, in the solitude of a party, I still prefer to spend the time as one of a trio of females.

When I see my sister, though, she's with a group of young men, sitting on a window seat in a velvet-curtained recess. The members of my sister's fan-club are all artists themselves, and are ardently discussing purple.

"How do you do it, man?" asks a boy with a goatee beard.

"Go redder than red," says my sister earnestly. "Get as red as can be, and it just happens naturally."

"You make it sound so easy," says another bohemian.

"No," says Hazel. "I've set my sights on blue now, and that sounds impossible too." An artistic gasp goes round the group and they all disappear for a second. So my sister sees me, standing on the edge, and stops talking.

"What?" I say.

She blinks in alarm then bursts out laughing.

"I didn't recognise you!" she says. "I don't know you from further away than an umbilical cord-length. You look so different in dreams."

"Mum's calling us," I say. "Are you coming?"

"Okay," Hazel replies. "Bye guys, see you later."

We trip up the stairs together, tittering at the distant feel of each other's bodies, now we're not attached to each other.

"I'm so dense," she laughs.

"Hello, darlings," says Mum, leaning against a balustrade nonchalantly.

"Isn't it too early to go upstairs?" I ask her.

She straightens up and quotes the final stanza of my sister's song, in a very determined way.

"Violet, in her late twenties,
doesn't wear a watch,
but is advised by her body clock
that the time is right."

"Oh no," I say.

"Oh yes," Juno replies. "Come on."

*

The numbers on the doors are star-studded; it's upstairs at parties that the real glamour is found. The drum-dance, the art-talk were just for talentspotting. Hazel smiles, a fabulous grin that seems to tug at me in lieu of our usual umbilical cord. I swan along the corridor of regency stripe wallpaper and gold skirting, led by Juno.

“Choose a door, any door,” she is crooning, “opportunity may knock tonight.” Mum flicks each portal with a painted fingernail as we pass it. “Luck is a lady,” she pouts over her shoulder as she points out the scores illuminated on each one, “diamonds are a girl’s best friend.”

In dreams we just about get numbers. I see that each room, upstairs in the sub-conscious chateau, has a chance, a likelihood, of being chosen; picked to be a ‘room of one’s own’. It’s a game we play at parties, a bit like consequences; if you could walk through any door, which door would it be? It’s famous for bringing on a Maternity Message.

The number I pick looks like snakes on a stick, the chemical symbol for a dream within a dream. Worth more to me than the number next door, and all that we’ve passed already down this fateful corridor. It’s a number that crosses back on itself, divides and doubles; a squiggle with a wiggle.

Only upstairs in dreams do we get the thrill of putting a hand on the door knob, of turning, and opening and entering. I walk straight into my maternity message. It’s a live theatre performance, with dazzling lights. I can just make out a big crowd at the edge of the stage. They are friends of the family, members of my congregation, and the social workers from the singalo centre.

My maternity message is not in English; its imagery, in translation, is a toss-up between the Virgin Mary and a strip-o-gram. Imagine the faces of my audience as I appear in the doorway like this, with more than just my knees knocking. My entrance is announced by a brassy fanfare, and a spotlight that glides me to the centre of the stage like a slide trombone. I wonder if, when the Gods first came up with this idea, they felt as silly as I do now. They’ve got me in a ballet. The music of Tchaikovsky is rising from the orchestra pit, wreathing itself around my legs like a chiffon skirt. In run a troupe of tiny children dressed as cherubs. They skip in a circle around me, holding hands.

Against the flat backdrop of a painted meadow, flowers start to grow. As each one opens, babies appear between the petals; curled up in the cups of tulips, nestling in beds of roses, peeking out of the lilies, playing boo with me. The music is blown on daffodil trumpets, and my tutu is stirring in the breeze of its triumphant song. In the sunshine of the spotlight, my belly is swelling. Five, six, seven, eight months pregnant; it burgeons with a golden feeling, until it bursts.

The glowing orb that bounces out is a football. I watch with pride as my four year old son scores a goal and wins the game for the under fives. There's a cheer from the spectators, applause from the theatre audience, daisy petals and ticker tape, but as the ball hits the back of the net the bubble bursts and I'm back on the podium at the party.

Everyone in my dream is clapping and cheering, but I stand there silent and empty handed. One of those babies, one of those little flower fairies or football heroes was mine; but the illusion faded before I could touch them. In the twinkling of an eye, UTR has taken hold of my body. Like an occupying dictator, it is implementing certain changes. The civilian waltz of my life has become a military march; no more self-indulgent circles on the dance-floor, now my life has direction and purpose.

The Urge To Reproduce arrives like a visitor, hence all the flowers. It brings me sudden inexplicable cravings, like a guest brings a box of chocolates.

"Congratulations," says Juno, stepping onto the platform, with her hands outstretched.

This makes me dizzy; I'm not used to seeing her separately. Overwhelmed by my weight without a safety line to my mother, I fall.

I fall to the floor and I fall through the floor, leaving a rubble ring. I fall through the ballroom below, plummeting through the air with my beaded ball gown parachuting, and fall straight through the dance floor too. I land in the cellar; but no, it's a cave. Jewels are glinting in the darkness. There must be a magic lantern somewhere.

Gleaming brightest is a pair of emeralds. I notice them at once because they are green, incredibly special, even in dreams. I crawl towards them, Aladdin style, but as I get closer I see that the jewels are not emeralds, they are eyes.

There's a lad in the darkness. It's the green-eyed man from the Singalo Centre, smiling at me. What's he doing at a proper person's party?

In the silence there come some words that explain everything; some instructions, in a song. Because it's so beautiful, and romantic, and strangely old-fashioned, I have translated it for you into Shakespearean sonnet form.

Behold your match, the single green-eyed man,
and hear the message long anticipated:

it's earth's most treasured wish and heaven's plan,
that you two will be romantically mated.
Behold his gaze, and in its mirror see
the face formed by your combined reflection,
the child that fate has already conceived,
the life that plans its own resurrection.
Behold the father of your unborn child
and though you dream him now, when you awake,
each atom of your being will be trying
to forge the future for that child's sake.
You're the one maternity has chosen,
act at once, your feelings are not frozen.

In shock I get heavier still, and with a crashing and crumbling of rocks and plaster, I fall through the floor again; and then the ceiling of the room I started in, upstairs at the party. I fall full circle and land, on my feet, exactly where I began.

Mum is still walking towards me.

"Congratulations," she says. "I hope that message was specific enough for you."

"It's just a dream," I mutter, completely phased by my mystical, vertical tour of the house.

"And dreams never lie," she says. "You are going to be blessed with a beautiful baby. But it's a shame we don't know who the father is yet."

I lie. I nod my head and say I expect we'll find out who the lucky male is soon; but in my mind's eye I can see him clear as crystal already, sitting in the cave of jewels, smiling in the darkness. I can see him rocking as he rubs his magic lamp, backwards and forwards as he rubs it over and over, producing not the voice of a great genie but the verse of our simple sonnet.

I keep it a secret while I can. Secrets and lies, alike, are only possible in dreams, for as soon as we awake Juno and Hazel will be able to see the pictures in my head. But it's not long till morning. The bell is ringing at the front door of the party house. The crowd is thinning rapidly as people are beginning to wake up.

"Come on, we'd better go," Hazel catches hold of my hand. "God, you're almost solid!" she shrieks.

Mum feels me too.

"We must hurry," she says, "or you won't make it."

With one of them on either side of me we leave our private party room. I'm so heavy, they have to drag me along. My feet seem rooted to the floorboards; to take a step I have to wrench the very wood up, and wear the planks like skis.

When we get to the top of the stairs, bells are ringing frantically in the hallway, and only a handful of people are still to be seen, slipping quickly through the front door. I'm starting to cry, which is a bad sign because crying is another thing we can only do in dreams, but the dream is nearly over and it should be time to lighten up now. If we can't get out before the door shuts, something terrible will happen to us.

We've seen it happen to a friend of the Kennedy sisters, who was always prone to emotional over-indulgence; and was sometimes so heavy that it was all her family could do to get off the ground. Routine flying was nothing though, compared with the trouble she had getting out of dreams. Once the umbilical link with her folks was severed, she would sink into a depression, spending her party-time drinking, crying, falling over and being sick; doing all the most grotesquely physical things you can think of. And one time, she simply got too real to leave at the end of the dream.

Apparently, her family watched helplessly as Evadne crawled across the hall floor like a human baby, crying like a middle-aged lush, swearing like a demented old lady. The front door shut before she could reach it, and when everyone woke up Eva was still unreachable, lost behind glazed eyes like someone in a coma. Her mother carried her body around carefully until the next party, fondly hoping they'd be able to find her soul in the dream house and bring her back intact. But it didn't happen like that.

Eve was waiting for them behind the front door. The walls of the great hall were smeared with excrement, and E came out of her hiding place howling. She had gone mad. The solitude of the empty house, the separation from her family, had driven her over the edge, and there was no bringing her back. For a while, she ran riot; ruling the staircase, antic queen of the banisters. But she was spoiling the party for everyone, people were too scared to have fun, so eventually she had to be captured and confined to a room in the attic. It took ten dream-dense men to catch her and carry her struggling up the stairs.

To this day, Evadne's body lives on like a vegetable, lovingly tended by her mother; while her spirit terrorises the neighbourhood from its garret prison cell. She's not the only one on the top floor either. We've seen similar things happen to several singalos, who stray by accident into proper people's dreams, and don't have the emotional support to get out again.

We are clinging to each other, my mother, my sister and I; the last ones to leave the party, almost leaving it too late.

"Hurry!" Hazel shouts. Our separate footsteps falter together at the top of the stairs. We have to go down to get out. She and Juno are trying to help me, holding my hands, but I'm holding them back.

I'm wearing skis. They're only an illusion, caused by that image of my feet glued to floorboards, of pulling them up by the roots as I walk; stuck fast, they're real enough to get us out of this dream back to our own unreal world. You should hear the clattering sound, as we ski down the staircase, me with a foot on each metaphorical plank of wood, Juno and Hazel behind me, snowboard style.

"Hooray!" I say as we skid across the slippery hallway, in a daredevil transition from one mental state to another. You've probably experienced the same thing. Have you ever dreamed that you were screaming and woken to the sound of your alarm ringing? Well, as we leave the house I dream that alarm bells are going off, and wake up to find it's actually me screaming.

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I know you dream too: the translator used a human Dreamer's Dictionary to come up with some of the details for that scene. Your definition is not the same as ours, though. Your dreams are less real than life; ours are more. You can fly in your dreams; we can't fly in ours.

Alison sometimes dreamed things like her cat snapped in half or she wrapped her mother in plastic; and often dreamed of the guy from downstairs, who told her about his dreams. They were lucid and he was lovely. They were crazy and he was cute.

This dream guy made her dumb, though he was quite clever. He fell asleep with work problems in his mind, and woke up with them solved, answers

he didn't already know. His unconscious was peopled with famous characters: Einstein and Ann Widdecombe had both spoken to him in his sleep.

But the other bloke who lived down below never remembered his dreams at all. She asked him: he said no. A hundred nights of a thousand snores, and he couldn't recall a single moment of the drama going on behind closed eyes. Clearly, there was something happening on that empty stage. The introduction to *Dreamer's Dictionary* says that without REM, you can't survive.

The girl downstairs had a much more glamorous dream life. She'd done things mentioned in the book, like dreaming that her teeth were falling out, or that she was walking down the street naked, or that she was in a play and didn't know any of her lines.

She didn't always play by the book, though. Her hair was dyed pink; depending on the season, it was freshly coloured with a shocking vibrancy or faded into a blushing poignancy. Pink hair, crimped; at complete odds with the hospital uniform that was now lying crumpled on the floor.

All the housemates had been in bed for hours. The walls of their crumbling accommodation had long since settled for the night. The only creaking was the ancient swivel chair the wannabe author had swivelled on for two days. Even her fictional character had been to sleep and dreamed, while she still woke and wrote.

Alison wanted to write a little bit further before falling into that much needed slumber, for fear of what would happen if she and I both slept at the same time. In the tunnel of reality that dreams seem to be for both human and her alien heroine, should we not meet somewhere in the middle; me more solid, you less so.

And as for whether dreams come true; for us, always. For you?

Juno and Hazel wake up before me, and pull me across the canyon of dawn by the umbilical cords that tie us together again. Across a chasm from one side of sleep to the other, I crawl on a shaky rope bridge; then collapse with relief on the right side of reality.

"Phew, that was close," says Hazel.

"But what a party," says Juno.

I groan.

"You feel terrible," says Hazel.

"But what a dream," says Juno.

"We nearly got stuck there," I say.

"And that would never do," says Mum, "because you, my dear, have a baby to make."

"God, you feel awful," my sister says. "How come your hangover is so much worse than mine?"

"You didn't fall through floors and ceilings," I croak.

"Floors and ceilings?" says Mum slowly as my mental images are mixed with hers, now that we are tuned in telepathically again. "Hang on, who's this little man in the cellar? And what's this song?" she adds, as she gets the soundtrack.

"Behold your match, the single green-eyed man," I whisper.

"Strike a light!" says Hazel. "You met the father of your child?"

"Yes, in the cellar," I say.

"He's only got one eye?" she asks.

"You can see for yourself," I reply, rather snappily. If the truth be known, and known it must be for we can only keep secrets in dreams, I don't want her to look at what's in the cellar.

"Young lovers always think their mate's eyes are green," says Hazel. "They'll probably look perfectly ordinary to me."

She falls silent, her own yellow eyes flickering as she watches my memory of the cellar scene like a videotape; then gives a violent exclamation.

"Struth! He's a singalo!"

My only urge is to deny it.

"No, he's not," I say. "Everyone is unattached like that in dreams!"

"But I recognise him from the day centre," says Hazel. "He comes to my art therapy sessions."

I glance about involuntarily to see if anyone has heard. I've always prided myself on not being prejudiced against singalos but I've never presumed that the father of my child would be one.

None of the proper people we know have had children fathered by a singalo. I'm not even sure if it's possible. The very thought of the process involved makes me blush; but being embarrassed by your boyfriend means it must be love. All the best relationships also cause pain.

"Look," says Juno gently, as she surveys the empty plain with me, "the party's over. It's time for morning service. Maternity can wait."

Before I can begin the service I have to build the church. I have to raise fourteen columns of white light. Seven-aside, they flank the aisle through which the congregation enter.

Sometimes it's easy. When my mind is focussed I can erect a temple to the splendour of the almighty as quick as you could say Jesus Christ. When my spirits are soaring I can create with the beauty and ingenuity of an elevated artist, like Michaelangelo, upside down, painting a masterpiece on the ceiling of the Sistine. When my heart is strong, I can hang there indefinitely.

But after the party I'm physically impaired. My head is too full of the night's revelry and revelations to build a church in. Luckily, the architecture of my cathedral follows the same principles as your Taj Mahal: it's based on the premise that love can do anything, even the impossible.

When I sing in devotion to Lee and Sheela, columns of white light, resonating love, reach heavenward. That's all the proof I need to know they're up there. The prayer is also the answer to the prayer.

My church is built by chanting. The song is just surrender. It starts when I stop fighting the urge to sing. It sounds of life's incidental notes; a gurgle of pleasure, a gasp of excitement, a sigh of joy. It washes away the debris of my dream, the night's heavy drinking and hard dancing. It eases my stiffness after the unexpected theatrical performance, and the shock of what was in the cellar. Singing is what to do when you're tired of crying and scared of screaming. Singing is what to do instead of shouting.

When I sing in devotion to the Godfather and Godmother, columns of white light reach heavenward. I chant each love song seven times, to Him and Her simultaneously, with a special technique called two-tone chanting, till seven pairs of pillars line the aisle.

Hers

His

You embody
the female principle
Your body
is vast
Airhead
apple mouth
bosomy snow slopes
You are rooted, waiting

You embody
the male principle
Your body
is fast
Arrowhead
snake tongue
probing mountain peaks
You are a seed, on the breeze

petals unfurling
moon phases passing

coal seams forming
geysers erupting

pliant as a beech wood bow

oystershell shut on its pearl

You are a bubble
soft-centred
Sheela
With you there are waterworks

You are a marble
hard-core
Lee
With you there are fireworks

Seven times I sing these rhymes, and when the seven pairs of pillars are erected, the tone of the chanting turns to our third God, the one whose name may not be named, and I start to raise the roof.

You embody
the two as one
In your body
opposites
unite
your hatred is embraced by love
fear teams up with bravery
loneliness makes friends with the life and soul
jealousy is conquered by self-confidence
greed is satisfied by generosity
prejudice is dismissed by basic intelligence
your anger is heard
your hurt is felt
your emptiness is filled
your wounds are healed
anon
with you there are earthworks

When I have sung to the un-named third God three times, my church is roofed with the resonance, and three families are drawn down the aisle, each one bigger than the last. A family may only travel towards another group of a greater number; that six may visit nine, but not vice versa. It ain't etiquette, but a law of physics. A large family is physically incapable of approaching a smaller one; it's a quantum matter.

Church is an exception to that rule. In church the energy changes, so that families of any size can be drawn towards the one at the altar. Even though I'm only one-in-three of a family, there's a group of thirty coming down the aisle to meet me.

Combined with the chant-induced euphoria, it completely clears my hangover. I am sharpened to a point by the concentration of more than sixty proper people; a holy pencil point. In the ringing silence that follows the singing, I start to give a sermon.

"Dearly beloved," I boom dramatically, but I really mean it. The congregation would know if I was faking it. They wouldn't come.

"Dearly beloved." It strums the cords that join us all together. A hum of pleasure runs through me. The congregation respond.

"Dearly beloved," I say, and the trickle gets more consistent. It pours. What if I said honey, dribbling down the altar steps. Honey from the source; yellow love, part light, part stickiness. Drenching me and dripping onto my congregation. Would you think I was making the act of worship dirty, with these sexual implications?

Normally, I sit on the lap of the Gods in a purely spiritual way. But last night's revelations are still lit up in the back of my mind, and I can't quite dispel the image of the man in the jewel cave, endlessly rubbing his magic lamp.

In the hot lantern light, with the erotic promise of a genie, I find myself making three wishes. While my religion is full of mystery, it's not meant to be a complete secret. Three families have come to church this morning. I wish I had the pulling power to attract some more. I wish my services were as popular as my sister's performances. Her psychedelic pinks and purples make my pale lemon seem a bit boring, I suppose. Her innovative singing makes my traditional

chanting seem a bit dull. I wish I could get the Woodstock effect, where the crowd is catching and the enthusiasm spreads like wildfire.

There is somebody else, though, about to come up my aisle. Someone lurking in the darkness at the foot of the first pillars of light. My flagging energy is lifted, pulse rate increased, as I prepare to pull. I fully expect a family to come flying toward the altar, perhaps followed by many others as my evangelical high kicks in; but it's met with resistance. Well, not resistance exactly, for I'm sure that my visitors are keen to come through the portal; but it feels like I'm trying to squeeze fifty families into the narrow bottleneck of my aisle, and they're not really trying at all.

And then I see who it is. A singalo falls to her hands and knees and lands in the light pool between the first two pillars. I can see from the struggle, the strain, the general look of a camel trying to pass through the eye of a needle, that she is trying hard to enter the kingdom of heaven. The resistance she is encountering must be as great as mine. I double my efforts to draw her toward the altar.

It's the same singalo I saw in my premonition. I'd know her anywhere, even if she only got as far as the font last time. This time, I'm determined to draw her further up the aisle. She has a look I find intriguing; she's beautiful and mysterious, just like my religion, and I would love the two of them to get better acquainted.

As I try to describe her, bear in mind that we look nothing like you. Beauty, you say, is skin deep; but we have no skin. You say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but we have no eyes; and even if we had they wouldn't be what we looked at each other with. I can only tell you how her looks make me feel. That's the way to objectivity.

First, think of the most beautiful woman you know. Imagine her coming towards you up the aisle of a church on her hands and knees. Imagine it's as difficult for her as climbing the walls.

Pretend you can't see her face yet; her head is down but you can see her hair. Now think of a metaphor for her hair, something equally pretty, invoking a similar response in you. Compare it to a summer's day, or dancing daffodils, to the raven's wing, or lamb's wool, if you will.

Then design her dress in your favourite colour. Perhaps something off-the-shoulder; goddess, raggle-taggle gypsy, bride. Something that shows her legs straining as she struggles up the aisle. She should probably wear trainers.

Next, compose the music to accompany her coming; and let it be trumpet for anger, cello for grief, violin for yearning, trombone for ambition; harp for her huge commitment, flute for the fluttering in your heart.

The most beautiful woman you can imagine is going through all this to get up the aisle to you. Then you see her face. Whatever brings a lump to your throat, please put in place of her face now. Anything from a winning goal to a whinnying foal, from a new-born baby to an old friend dying; anything from the sunrise to the sunset. So long as it gives you a lump in your throat, a heart in your mouth, a twinkle in your eye; then I'll know you understand true beauty.

The singalo has made it to the second pair of pillars of light. That's only a fraction closer to any chance of communication with me while we're in the church state. Telepathy is useless, there's no way she can hear my thoughts.

She's still crawling towards me up the aisle, like she's tied to the end of a piece of elastic which at any moment is going to snap back.

Now that I've embarrassed myself by saying how pleased I am to see this singalo girl, I'll show you how quickly she leaves. The elastic snaps back, and she disappears. It seems she got as far up my aisle as she could, without snapping the elastic completely. She either had to obey the laws of elasticity, or stay up my aisle forever.

She goes like a door slamming after a drunken party, like a blast of fresh air, a bitten tongue. It brings me back to my senses, and to the senses of my congregation. They haven't seen the singalo but they can feel I've been distracted. It's time to deliver my sermon with a bang.

To keep it brief, I've translated this seasonal homily into a Japanese Haiku. The message is seventeen syllables; the meaning lasts longer.

Amaryllis bulb
Christmas gift in brown paper
By spring crimson-wrapped

*

Alison didn't remember writing this, when she read it back the next morning. For a while, on opening her eyes, she didn't remember writing anything. It felt like a good night's sleep, though she'd had dreams about the cat snapping in half and wrapping her mother in plastic.

After her first cup of tea, and a rainbow meditation in which she sat and washed each chakra of her body, seven from root to crown, by breathing in and out a different colour from red to violet, she still didn't recall any writing. Another cuppa, and a long mooch about matey boy down below, gone to work by now, away from the influence of her aura. Finally she went to her desk to clear last night's used cups and empty the ashtray. Then she remembered the long, hazy novel-writing session, and booted up her computer to read it.

No sooner than she'd counted the syllables in her haiku, Alison was off again; the unexpected sentences springing, paragraphs pouring from the Helicon source. From her mouse mat Urania, muse of science fiction, winked.

But I've stopped flying with my eyes open. On the way from church to the singalo centre, I keep them tight shut; but I can't shut out my sister's telepathic tones.

"Look at you," Hazel teases, "all mature and responsible. Flying blind on the way to your first date."

Mum mentally shuts her up. "It's a big moment for Angela," she says. "Get into it."

Once Hazel starts concentrating too, the nervousness increases. Our flying bodies are all a flutter. A breathless feeling comes upon us in the airless sky; and although we don't have hearts like yours, our pulses are racing.

You people are good at hiding anxiety, but it sometimes shows itself in the form of asthma attacks, heart attacks, attacks of the irritable bowel. For proper people, there's never anywhere to hide our feelings; our bodies are transparent. There are no dark recesses where disease could grow unseen. Our hearts are visible; our loved ones always see when it's about to blow.

But a problem shared is not halved, as you believe. A problem shared is doubled or quadrupled, massively increased, depending on the size of the family. For a while, Juno and Hazel feel my nervous excitement; the butterflies threaten

to overtake us as we fly. Learning to ride them, the feeling subsides; carried along on their adrenalin wings, our nerves disappear.

As we land at the wrought iron gates of the Singalo Centre, I am calm. When we see the bunting, and hear the fanfare of a wounded bugle, I stay calm.

The family of social workers are there to draw us inside.

"Congratulations," they say. They know about my maternity message because they were at the party. "What a wonderful night," they say. "Sorry we didn't make it to church this morning."

"That's okay," I smile coolly. They never do.

"Come in," they beseech me. "Tell us who the lucky man is."

The beauty of being mated with a singalo is that no one else knows. Because he is not telepathic, and has no family to read his mind, his paternity may remain a complete secret. I'm not even sure if he is aware of the fact himself; that he's expected to father my child.

"You don't have to do a session today," says the head social worker, "if you're not feeling up to it."

"We heard you were the last to leave the party," says Neckola, her next in line.

"We heard you nearly didn't make it at all," says Kneena, one of the lower down members of staff.

"That is quite correct," says Juno. "But we're fully recovered now, and looking forward to a nice, relaxing art therapy session."

The team draw us into the centre of their space, where a familiar collection of singalos are waiting; some ambulant, some sitting in armchairs. They've obviously been told about my happy news, for they call out congratulations, or wave infant knitting in pastel colours.

Before I can say thanks, my sister's voice gives a shout in my mind.

"He's not here!"

"Who?" I reply telepathically.

Her eyes roam the crowd. "Your main man, he's missing!"

Before I can say bollocks, Mum silently reassures me.

"Stay calm," she says. "We don't want to give him away."

"He's probably just late," adds Hazel. "We should start the session." Simultaneously, she says to the singalos, "It's getting late. Let's start the session."

"We were rather hoping," says the head social worker politely, "that Angela would tell us more about her maternity message."

"Maybe later," says Hazel; brilliantly faking a little fit of jealousy, as if piqued by people's interest in my private life over her art. Such pettiness is not in her nature, and the family of social workers should know that by now, but her pouting sucks them all in.

"Forgive us," they say. "Therapy first, chat later."

My sister nods forgiveness at the group, while muttering, "He'll probably saunter in half way through," to me. Then she starts the session.

"Trances please," she says, to the upturned faces of the waiting singalos. "Overtures and beginnings."

She unleashes her yellowness on the room like the sun bursting from behind the clouds. People close their eyes to her brightness, but still bask in her glow.

I'm startled by the sharpness of this yellow. I've never noticed its acidity before. It's making me bilious. I try to settle deeper into my trance, to the place where I know there'll be dancing daffodils, and Easter eggs. But the very thought of such things makes me feel sick. And in fact, as my sister makes the transition from yellow to orange I envisage myself cracking open a boiled egg to find a dead chick, then spewing up a rush of diced carrots, if you'll excuse the earthy terms.

"Do you mind?" says my sister, in a telepathic aside.

"Sorry," I reply.

I try to concentrate on the orange, to bathe in its sweet warmth; but it is as if, having sat down to my usual breakfast marmalade one morning, I suddenly realise it is full of worms like writhing strands of peel. I gag on it. I spit it out.

"Hey!" Hazel protests.

"I know what's happening," says Mum. "It's the UTR. She's developing strange cravings and violent repulsions."

"Well, can she refrain from doing so while I'm singing?" demands Hazel.

"I'm afraid not," says Juno telepathically. "We three are one; and we're going to feel everything she feels, until we three are four."

There is the sound of what you would call someone clearing their throat. Juno, Hazel and I open our eyes. The orange has faded, all around us it is ebbing back to yellow. We meet the gaze of the head social worker, eyebrows raised. The colour is wan, the dirty yellow of old lace.

"Are you okay?" ask the social workers anxiously.

"Yes, we're just, er, adjusting," says Hazel, "to our change in circumstances."

"Do you want to give the art a miss, today?" say the social workers.

"No, we'll carry on," replies Hazel. "Sorry, everyone."

She starts again, with renewed vigour. The old lace is quickly transformed into gold lace then she applies fire. Her colour becomes a molten honeycomb, glowing orange, slowly turning red; lace like a network of veins. As the heat intensifies, the leaf-pattern arteries pound, the colour becomes purple and engorged.

Hazel bursts into song. I feel as well as hear it; a-didgeridoodle-do. A wake-up call resonant with reproductive intent. My senses run the length of her note, responding to its inflections. It's long and thin, a hollow bamboo filled with the breath of the divine, and I need it like I need a cock-crow in the morning.

I soar up and down the song like a bird, registering the changes along its length. It's red at the bottom, giving rise to an incredible purple stamen, a shaft of colour.

I hold myself still against it. The tendency is to keep moving up, humming in an elevator, while floor after floor flashes by with brief bursts of musical activity: but I hold myself still. And when the doors open, there's someone waiting on the landing, face to face with me.

It's my singalo. The green-eyed man. My bold match. I behold him.

Hazel's song wavers for a moment. His image must be as clear in her mind as it is in mine. Her song wavers, and the colour dims; as if the electrics in the lift are on the blink.

"His eyes really are green," she says telepathically. "That is so..."

She gives a jolt, a short-circuit that shuts the lift doors abruptly; and her song starts to soar again, up through the layers of purple that seem unsatisfying now that we've seen green.

"Extraordinary," she trills, inwardly in tune with her outward melody. "Will we ever find it for ourselves?"

I can't answer. I'm trying to get back into the purple. I was enjoying the, what do you call it, eroticism: the seductive pulsing in the vein of the song. The bruising length of colour from indigo to violet. Dare I call it a penis of sound?

There is coughing, or at least, the proper equivalent of coughing, coming from the singalo day room. Mum, Hazel and I open our eyes at once; but our vision is clouded by the purple haze.

"Stop, please, you must stop," pants the head social worker.

None of us can form the words to reply, not even Juno, so lost were we in Hazel's art form.

"I'm sorry," the Head says, "I know Angela is a priestess, but this isn't a church, and frankly things are getting a bit smoky."

I laugh out loud. Juno and Hazel go shush in my head.

"It's true," I tell them jubilantly, "I definitely started to see blue then."

"Perhaps the end of the purple rainbow is the beginning of a rainbow of blue," says Juno. "But look, we've upset the social workers. Quick, let's pacify them."

The social workers are obviously having a telepathic conversation of their own. One gestures angrily. Another snorts, and another shrugs.

"How are the singalos?" I ask timidly. "We're sorry to have upset them. We got a bit carried away."

As the purple starts to clear, and we catch glimpses of smiling faces, the head social worker has to admit that the singalos are not particularly distressed, but still insists that the art therapy was overstepping the mark.

There is no animosity between us, though, and as soon as it seems safe to do so, I start a separate conversation with one of the male staff members, Al Bo. (It was my idea to translate each social worker as a part of the body, to show how every member of the family works with the whole.)

Anyway, I casually drop a question about the green-eyed singalo into conversation with Al Bo. Keeping my voice low, to disguise the screaming UTR, I ask where he is today. And Al casually replies that today the green-eyed man wanted to stay in his room.

For someone who has no concept of time as you know it, I seem to be saying 'today' a lot. For a person whose planet has never revolved around a sun, I seem to have adapted quickly to a daily cycle.

In fact, I can say today whenever I like, because, in the Real World, it always is.

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But I will never be able to enter somebody's private room. Today, tomorrow or in ten years time, I couldn't get into a singalo bedchamber. The concept of doors is something proper people can only handle in dreams. In the singalo centre, we perceive them as a series of concentric circles, impossible to pass through without an ungainly straining sound.

"There must be a hole," says Juno, "at the centre of those circles. You'll have to look into it."

Looking at the door till I'm dizzy, I do get a glimpse, through the keyhole, of the singalo of my dreams. Our different frequencies cause a strobe effect, so my first sighting of him is in a series of frozen poses; a handsome statue with arms and legs crudely animated. You might recognise him as Michelangelo's David, his eyes fig-leaf green. It's a marvellous male body, carved in marble; managing against the odds to boogie.

"Sorry," Mum's voice bursts into my thoughts, bringing me back abruptly from the keyhole centre of his bedroom door. "Time for school."

"I'll say one thing for this ideal man of yours," Hazel adds, as we leave the scene, "he's got great body definition." In your terms that might mean pert pectorals, bulging biceps and firm buttocks; but she is merely observing that his physical form is more clearly outlined than a proper person's.

All the way to school, she and Juno chatter excitedly about the green-eyed singalo guy. But if I start gushing on about my geezer, I won't be able to stop.

The class are waiting for us, arranged in rows as neat as their umbilical cords will allow. Juno calls the register.

"Hummmmm," she sings, selecting a pitch for the students to tune into.

"Hummmmm," the class reply, the note resonating like a bell to signify the start of the school day.

"Now class," my mother says, as the adults of the family sink into a trance, "we're going to tackle a very difficult subject. What can you tell me about singalos mating with proper people?"

There's a gulp. A question this hard can only be answered by someone very, very young. The smallest kid in the school, still feeding at his mother's breast, starts to speak; just telepathically, his tongue not yet able to form the words. All we hear aloud is sucking, as his wise old voice says:

"There was a time, long before singalos built their city, when the world was green. They lived where the colour was thickest, surviving under its canopy, thriving on its roots. They chopped and shaped the substance, wove and whittled the texture, to make their little houses and feed their hungry kids.

Singalos were always good with their hands; they had to be, without the mental powers of Proper People. Anything that needed doing must be physically done. Picking, threshing, sticking, meshing; life was a grind and the work never stopped.

One family, in a thatched hut deep in the greenwood, made their livelihood stripping saplings of colour; each mossy twig had a matt exterior but a vivid brilliance within. Mother, father, son and daughters, spent each day bent on releasing the green energy at the heart of plants."

"How do you know this?" asks Juno, the teacher.

"I was there," replies the tiny pupil.

"Who were you?"

"Let me come to that," says the child, "when the background is painted. One day, a family of proper people found their way to the cottage in the woods. They had a daughter of child-bearing age; and she and the singalo son mated."

"Was there a maternity message?" gasps my mother.

"Yes," says the schoolchild. "It was the map that led the girl's family there in the first place. She saw her green-eyed lover in a dream. He was laid out like a landscape and she was flying over him, over the rippling cornfield of his torso and the river valley of his thighs. There was a forest fire and a column of smoke was rising into the air. She flew through the smoke, and woke up with the Urge To Reproduce."

"How do you know this?" Juno says again.

"I was her mother," says the baby. A buzz of excitement goes round the class. "I saw it all. Not the actual mating, of course. We were in a trance for that. But I saw her bear the singalo's child. She had a normal pregnancy. A normal birth."

"A normal baby?" asks Juno.

There is no answer from her student.

"A normal baby?" Juno asks again.

The telepathic silence is broken by the wail of an angry infant. We all open our eyes to see the open mouth of the child who sits on his mother's lap, tremulous-lipped and runny-nosed, like a normal baby. He has slipped out of his teacher's spell, which happens if a scholar is upset by their regression.

The family's ancient matriarch, similar in size to its tiniest boy but a dried flower beside a dewy bud, shakes her head in disbelief.

"In all my lives," Hellenic says, "I've never heard such a singalo story."

Her great great granddaughter, the mother of the baby, hugs her mini-Homer proudly. I am paralysed by the baby's movements; watching the precocious fists and feet as they fly. I fight to stop myself answering his cry. Overwhelmed with UTR, I devour the baby whole with greedy eyes. Proper people don't eat, as you may have noticed, except in dreams; but the Urge To Reproduce is like a hunger, a feeling of emptiness we naturally want to fill.

I want to eat the baby. I want it to be inside me, filling my belly with a snug fit. I want to nibble those delicate sugar-tipped fingers and kiss that fragrant head, with its candy-floss curls.

His mother notices my mesmerised gaze, and holds on tighter to the child. My mother notices my mesmerised gaze, and snaps her fingers in my face.

"Come on, darling," she says, "it's Confession time."

It's been ages since my last confession. Normal church services are held to a formal timetable, but confession is more spontaneous. When the translator told me what confessing means on Earth, I laughed; you've got it back to front!

Proper people hear the sins of their priestess, not vice-versa. I confess to my congregation; it has to be that way round. How else could my heart be pure enough, my spirit see-through enough to show the truth within?

The Boniface family enter my inner sanctum, dimmer than the column-lined aisle of the church, lit by a ring of candlelight. And the song which draws them inside is not the booming exultation of the big services, but a whispered invitation to hear my secrets.

"Forgive me, for I have sinned," I say to the Bonifaces.

"What have you done?" they murmur in response.

"I have been prejudiced," I mutter, eyes downcast.

"Oh? Against whom?" they ask.

"Against singalos."

"That's only to be expected," the whole family shrug as one.

"But it isn't right," I reply.

I have to tell them the whole story. It'll all come out sooner or later, and Confession seems an appropriate place to start.

"I've had a Maternity Message," I say.

"We know," they nod. "Congratulations."

"The Lucky Man is a singalo."

"What?"

"I must mate with a singalo," I say.

"But that's unheard of," they declare.

"We have heard of it happening, in history class," I tell them. "One of Juno's students recounted a rare tale. The problem is I've always prized my open-minded attitude to singalos. I've considered them easily our equals. I've even put them on a pedestal. But now that a match has been struck between me and one of their number, I find myself to be a crumbling pillar of the community."

"What do you mean?" ask the Boniface family.

"I want my baby to be proper," I say, "not a half-caste soul."

"That's fair enough," they reply.

"It's wrong," I say. "I can't nurture prejudice if I want to be a priestess or a good mother."

"You're probably right," say the family, looking slightly ashamed.

"How then can I cleanse my thoughts?" I ask them. "For if my church windows are dirty, heaven's light cannot shine through."

"Accept your fate," my confessors speak slowly, "accept your mate."

I smile. These are the first words of a prayer I have said hundreds of times, aloud in church, and privately to people; amidst Joyful celebration and awkward silences. It is the Pregnancy Prayer.

"Let's say it together," I beg the Bonifaces, gratefully.

"Accept your fate, accept your mate,
Nothing comes early that should come late
Nothing happens but that which should do
Nothing is asked of you but that which you could do
Nothing is a substitute for something else that would do
Accept your fate, accept your mate,
Accept the invitation for a certain date."

After we have said the prayer my mind is clearer. Many times I've seen these words calm those who are struggling to resist the inevitable. I realised in the first line that there's no point fighting it. My fate is already sealed, like an envelope in a magic trick; and the answer is already there, before the show has started.

The sooner I accept the unseen rules of the game, the better a priestess and a parent I will be.

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Alison took a break from the writing that night; though it didn't let her go easily. She went downstairs to where her housemates were congregating round an oval dining-table with Louis XV legs. Dining is a loose translation; this was a gaming and a gossiping table, a drug-taking and a debating table; with its varnish scratched and its veneer scored. Some of her friends might have had sex on it, but Alison never had bowed her legs by it, like that.

She was telling them about the translation. The two guys, the girl, pouring from a square blue glass bottle as if it were the source of my brilliant story. (Funny, that's probably their most mystical drinking vessel; but it looks like a baby's lego brick to me.) They knew she'd been trying to write for ages then they hadn't seen her for three days. They were asking her how the work was going.

“Weirdly,” was the first word she thought of.

“I like Lovecraft, Tolkein, China Mieville!” the guy she likes more was enthusiastic. “Fiction should always be fantasy, for me.”

“I like H.G. Wells, Asimov, Iain M. Banks!” his best mate chipped in. “It should always be sci-fi, for me.”

“So, where do you get your ideas from, Alison?” asked the girl sitting opposite her, blowing a cloud of dirty grey, a dingy speech bubble into the air between them.

“It’s the strangest thing,” Alison answered, “I was sitting there for aeons wondering what to write, then suddenly this voice was telling me. This character just started speaking in my head...”

“Must be the muse,” the pink-haired girl says; but Alison replied that the voice was too rude.

Who would listen if the muses were so boastful? she thought to herself, picking at the plasticine food. No, her novel was semi-autobiographical; and though his eyes weren’t exactly green, the man of her dreams was as hard to get. Alison was aware that her body was broody like her brain had the urge to write. The need to go on penning this novel was a sensation as sharp as ovulation, dragging on until menstruation, with the promise of gestation always over the page.

And as her chosen man was just flicking the play-doh peas in a humorous food war with his best friend, she left the oval table soon and headed back upstairs to her desk. So far, motherhood may not have chosen her; but maybe a muse of comedy or tragedy will pick her to tell part of the story:

Meanwhile, my family of three fly straight from Confession to the Singalo Centre for an art therapy session. The staff are waiting for us on the threshold, talking excitedly.

"Great news!" they call, as we come into view. "There's been another Maternity Message."

"Oh! For whom?" says Juno, alighting in front of them.

"For Madge Kennedy," they reply.

My great friend Madge! We'll be able to swap stories of UTR, and share the joys of pregnancy and motherhood.

"And who is the Lucky Man?" asks Juno.

"Well," Kneena says, "you know the Windsaw Family?"

We all nod. The Windsaw family beat the Kennedys for rank and status.

"You know Willyum Windsaw, their dishy son?" says the young social worker, a sucker for romance. "It's him!"

"A fortunate alliance," says Mum, in the formal tone appropriate to such an occasion. "What say you daughters?"

I don't say anything. There's something incredible going on over the family's shoulders. Behind their backs, Dot is spinning, as usual, in the entrance hall; but, as I watch, the singalo girl who tried so hard to come into my church slips easily through a sliding glass doorway and approaches her. I stare in silence as she walks up to the distressed Dot, and whispers something in her ear.

"Wonderful news!" says Hazel. "What was the maternity message, exactly?"

"Don't know," says Neckola. "We've only heard by word of mouth."

"We'll go to the Kennedys and hear it for ourselves," Mum suggests.

"Angela and Madge are bosom buddies, aren't you?"

"Who's that?" I ask.

"Madge Kennedy, darling!"

"No, who's **that**?" I say, nodding over the social workers' shoulders. They turn around to look, but in the split second that I took my eyes off her the singalo girl disappeared. Now there is only Dot standing there, not spinning.

"Hey!" says the head social worker. "Dot's not spinning."

"Perhaps we can persuade her to join the session today," says my sister.

"Dot never takes part in anything," says Neckie. "She's a very solitary singalo."

"We should start, anyway," says the Head. "Let's go inside."

They have to enter first, because they have the key; the key, that is, to moving collectively in a space designed for single people. Once they have established their presence in the centre, Juno, Hazel and I are pulled inside.

We are drawn into a circle that has someone missing. The singalos are there as usual, registering pleasure at our arrival, but the one I was really looking forward to seeing isn't here. This is the second time he's missed a session; since I received the maternity message he hasn't come at all.

I start to trance with a sinking feeling. Could it be even worse for him having to mate with me, than it is for me mating with him? From his point of view, there's a giant golden woman, more see-through than solid to fill. What if it seems like an impossible task. The art therapy starts, but behind my closed eyes I don't see any colour. There's just darkness.

Hazel's rainbow unfurls normally, but during the song we hear a new voice. It's a weird, tuneless tone, but it's definitely singing. I open my eyes and see who it is.

It's Dot. Dot who never joins in, is joining in. It's another blow to the myth that singalos can't sing; a glimmer of hope that they can bring other glad tidings. I trance out again, and this time I put my heart into the song.

Synchronicity; on leaving the Singalo Centre, the first people we bump into are the Kennedys. We shower Madge in congratulations, which to Alison would feel like confetti; and telepathic hugs, which for Alison would tickle unbearably.

"Tell us everything!" Juno says.

"Well," says Madge, "one minute I was standing there looking at a big hunk of marble with a chisel in my hand, and the next I was frantically chipping away at it, frenziedly sculpting without an idea in my head as to what would appear."

"And what did appear?" asks my sister, awe-struck.

"Willyum Windsaw! Life-like in every detail."

"Have you met him in the flesh?" asks Hazel. (Obviously this is not a literal translation of her question.)

"Once or twice," says Madge, "but I've never studied him closely. The image I created was not from an empirical source. It was heaven sent."

"Do you like him then?" I ask.

"I do now," smiles Madge.

"That's the power of art," says Hazel.

Even though Madge, a sculptress, uses a different form, they both channel ideas from a higher source and can hear where there other is coming from.

"It's awesome," she agrees, "when the creation seems to come from through you, but not from you..."

"Yes," nods Hazel. "Like you are just a tool in the greater artist's hand..."

I turn off their conversation at this point and tune into another topic of discussion, a current affair that interests me more. The Kennedy family are very

political and their ranks are always buzzing with lively debate. Welcome to the cosmic wavelengths of Radio Four.

Madge and Mavis have an uncle Ray who is following the progress of a religious revolutionary. He says this individual has stirred up the singalo population in all five corners of the Real World; and now the telepathic word is they are coming our way.

"The singalos round here are unstable enough without some radical upsetting them," says Ray Kennedy.

"But maybe it will be a stabilising force," I reply. "A move to unification."

"Unified singalos? I can't see it myself," blusters Ray.

"I have heard," says Doreen Kennedy quietly, "this singalo claims to know the name of the third god."

"That would be blasphemy!" shouts Ray.

"But singalos don't have the same gods as us, do they?" asks Mavis.

I laugh at her.

"What?" she says.

"The gods are the same," I say, "regardless of our little differences."

"But singalos know nothing about religion," says Ray. "They can't even get into our churches, so how can they hear us pray?"

I laugh again. If Ray managed to get into church more often, he'd know it's not the only place where God is.

"Angela's had a singalo trying to get up her aisle the last two services," says Hazel defiantly.

"Gosh, that's odd," says Mavis. "I wonder why?"

"Look, I'm sorry," says Madge, "but we've got to fly. I'm getting fidgety."

She is too. Her personal space is red and tender, an inflammation of the aura. It's the UTR.

"To the Windsaw's then," says her aunt, Doreen. "It's lucky they're a bigger family than us, or Madge would have to play hard-to-get. Do you want to come and watch?"

"It's time for school now," says Juno.

"But we'll see you soon," I say. "We'll do the pregnancy prayer."

"Super, sweetie," says Doreen. We normally call her Do. She's one of those women of a certain age who hides the real length of her hair by curling it. The brass-coloured perm is achieved by fuzzy thinking.

"Come on," says Madge, "or I'll be so heavy with sexual intent that we won't get off the ground."

"Okay then," says Ray, and they all wave goodbye. "Sing us into the air, Hazel."

Without hesitation Hazel opens her mouth and lets out a supersonic sound. It's a rocket-launching roar; sending Do, Ray and the Kennedy jet-set So Far into orbit and out of sight.

We take off straight after. My mother is in a hurry to get back to school because she's been worried about the child who regressed in the last session; but we arrive in class to find him sitting on his mother's knee, as rosy and composed as a baby can be.

"How is he?" Juno asks.

"Fine," his mum replies. She's called Diana, with that ancient Greek look the whole family have. Clad as the huntress in buckskin boots and leather belts; but for all that, she's younger than me. A yummiest mummy than I'm going to be.

"I'd like to question your baby further," Juno says.

Kosmas, his young cousin, sitting on the next-door knee, says, "He's the star pupil, isn't he?"

"Don't be jealous, dear," says his mum.

"I'm not," says Kosmas, a golden bubble of snot bursting at his nose. "I just mean he's old as the universe."

"He certainly seems to have a long memory," says Juno. "So, let's see if we can get another instalment of that story from the beginning of time. Trances please everyone. Good."

The baby starts to speak straight away. He seems to be halfway through a conversation.

"Male singalos," he tuts, "they're in a world of their own. It's all short-sighted sensation."

He shakes his head crossly.

"This one hadn't a clue how to court a proper lady. He was sweet enough, but didn't know how to treat her family. He kept making clumsy mistakes; forgetting we could all hear what she was thinking. Luckily, my daughter was very matter-of-fact about it. She kept the social intercourse to a minimum and just got on and mated with him."

"Tell me," Mum asks, "was the mating process straightforward? Was it, you know, as it would have been with a proper man?"

The baby brushes the question aside.

"It's not particularly polite to ask," he says.

Juno is just trying to find out how it'll be for me, for us, having to mate with one of them. Gently, so as not to disturb the concentration of her class, she digs deeper.

"Last time, I asked you about the offspring of this couple," she says to her tiny pupil. "Can you talk about that?"

"There was a terrible war between the singalo sexes," the baby boy says, in the voice of an old lady. "But it all started as a misunderstanding.

"The male singalos thought they were in charge. They thought they were better than the females, because they were bigger. They were dealing in quantity, not quality. The ladies were so completely opposite that even their language went its separate ways:

"Men stopped using adjectives, only spoke objectively. Women only used the subjective mode, and everything they said was a question. Men's discourse became linear as they strove to get higher, faster, stronger; as they reached for the future. The women went round in circles as they sat at home with babies and old folk; listening to history, hearing its immeasurable developments.

"Everyone was getting on much better with their mates than with their mate. In fact, sometimes it seemed that the male and female singalos were from different planets; *Men are from Pluto, Women are from Uranus.*

"Soon, they were split right down to their souls, with divided social rules and rituals. For the males, the ball was sacred; for the females, the cup. Men worshipped anything spherical and solid, revered anything that was round and rolled; for women any hollow container was divine. Anything empty, that could be filled."

The baby's tone is slow and dreamy, but suddenly it sharpens to a point. "Look at this," he says, and points a finger sharply too. On a blank page of space between the pupils and teacher, the baby shows us a picture; a mental image, projected telepathically onto an overhead screen, just like in your classrooms; because even great minds need PowerPoint.

We see a picture of the baby that was his grandchild when he was this old lady; but it's horribly deformed. Imagine a cup-shape made of flesh and bone, with a sphere the size of a baby's head jammed into it. A skin-coloured cup, no handle, with a ball of the same featureless material filling its socket perfectly; a fit as smooth as an acorn's.

Is this what you get when you cross a Proper Person with a Singalo? It is not simply a deformed child: it is not a child. This is a sign, made of organic matter. This is a message, made of flesh.

"What did it mean?" asks Juno aghast.

"Death, for us," said the old lady baby. "My daughter died of shock after the birth. I followed, and so did my sons, as cord-rot set in; and soon there was nothing left of the family but a few scattered souls taking their last breaths.

"I'm sorry to hear that," says Juno.

"So you should be," says the old lady. "Your younger daughter was one of them."

"What?" gasps mum aloud, and Hazel silently in her trance.

"Your daughter was my aunt in that lifetime," says the baby boy.

"What a coincidence!" Hazel mouths inwardly. "We only know two moments in history where a proper person is meant to mate with a singalo, and I've been there both times."

"That's not a coincidence, silly," I think back. "That's meant to be."

"Stay in your trances please," Mum tells us telepathically. "This is turning into a multiple regression. It takes a lot of mental energy."

But Alison came out of her trance too, physical energy twitching her out of her chair, whisking her away from the message made of flesh, if such a he-mail or she-mail existed. She'd been sitting at the computer for ages without any sense of time; not stopping to eat or drink yet feeling replete. Where did it come from, this literary sustenance? She wandered around the flat, stopping at the hall table, with

its shrine to the Muses all dusty and diluted by small change and other profane shrapnel.

If she genuflected it was just to stretch her legs after sitting so long; if she tidied the eclectic relics of inspiration it was just organisation, not awe. Anyone could write a story, she always said. But this one had never been plotted; not consciously, anyway. She didn't know where the ideas were coming from. Narnia, Nirvana, Neverland? Had other writers ever composed such unexpected sentences?

Spinning a relationship saga of families joined by glowing cords, across lifetimes remembered in etheric classrooms; her material was newer than novel. The voice seemed to be channelled; when it said I, she hadn't a clue what would come out; when it said you, it was talking to her. This fictional character seemed to think it was the real one. Alison turned the computer off.

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Told you time has no meaning. She turned it on again immediately. For her, in fact, some time had elapsed. Either one day or one year; I don't really understand the maths. But for us, the story picks up where it left off.

In school, with Juno doing the talking, we learn what might happen if a proper person mates with a singalo. Mum didn't know the answer already; her regressed kids have the facts. But this lesson is so fascinating that the grown-ups are joining in.

"I was there too," an older man with a ring of orange hair around a bloodshot crown, speaks out from the back of the class. He is the baby's uncle now, but in the previous lifetime he was the old lady's nephew.

(Yes, you only live once. We've already noted that; there's no evidence for reincarnation in your book. Carefully, so as not to shatter your illusion, try this story for size. It's only the translation, after all, not an original.)

"I've been with you in other incarnations too," says Uncle Zorba, in telepathic tones.

"Who were you?" asks the baby.

"Remember when you were a famous poet," Zorba replies, "and a madman took to following you about? Your family was afraid of him and wanted to fly away, but you always stopped to listen to the stalker's poems."

"Yes," says the baby.

"The rest of his family never understood them," Zorba smiles, "but you might remember one":

I wrote this in black ink on the night sky
With stars to dot the 'i's;
I wrote this in sap ink on the bark of trees
With ants for full-stops
So the meaning was always moving;
I wrote this in stretch marks on my mother's stomach

Juno raises an eyebrow, elegant as the engraving on gold plate, as the dad at the back of her class goes on spouting his past-life poetry:

I spoke this in the silent library
Loudly as books shout
I spoke this in tongues of fire
Burning what the poem is about
So the subtext is read in the ashes
I spoke this in the raving tones of a lunatic

This is the whimper
That starts when words fail me
And ends with a bang!

"Hey," says the baby, "were you that lunatic? Your bang really used to make us jump. My family hated you; but I loved your poems."

"What was that one called?" asks Mum.

"It was Plagiarised," says Uncle Zorba.

"Oh. From what?"

"No, Plagiarised was the title," says Zorba. "It was a test. He was a poet,

I was a bum."

"I never thought the words belonged to anyone," burbles the boy. "When I wrote a poem, it just flowed through me, not from me; a stream whose source was higher than I could get. I went where it wanted to take me, when the spring overflowed."

"Divine inspiration," Hazel nods. She's scaling that mountainside, to the place where ideas trickle from the rocks. You've seen it too, way back in human mythology, where the Muses of Mount Helicon presided over the fount of all poetry and song. In the first verse of your creation, godfather Zeus lay with a Titan called Memory, and the nine Muses were born. In the beginning, they were the word.

Truth and wit piped from their celestial lips. They could sing wisdom, they could dance glory; they could whisper brilliant ideas in pretty much any poet's ear. They're not all nice, don't get me wrong; it's not all sweetness and light. There is a muse of erotica, of war movies, of political thrillers; they like a little noir.

We look a bit like those beautiful maidens, you know; dancing in a circle, in off-the-shoulder togas with laurel wreaths in our hair. Call us Calliope, Polyhymnia and Terpsichore; there's an uncannily close resemblance to the goddesses of creativity. We look more like them than you do, anyway. And though their names are a bit of a mouthful, they're easier to get your tongues round than ours.

Wherever there is Once Upon a Time, we all come back to the same beginning. Strange and telling; both you and I, person and alien, bow to the same muses. We're not making the story up, neither are you; this is only a translation of their heavenly singing. The original really exists; how strong depends on its reading. Climb nearer the spring. If you can smell the herbs drying where they grow on the hot mountainside of ancient Greece, then you are coming closer to the genius song, and the Proper way of thinking.

The next thing I know; Juno is moving everyone up a grade, at school. We've done so well, not just the class of kids but their parents and grandparents, and even Hazel and I, who were only there waiting for our mum to finish work, have learnt the first lesson of all; the hardest and the fastest.

The word was in the beginning. It was one, and we were one with it; us proper nouns, and you improper people, and singalos too, for all I know. If mine

ever got here, I'd find out if they are present at the mountain spring which waters the mind, oils the fingers and lubricates the tongue.

Our teacher is passing among the class, putting graduation hats on us, very highbrow. It's a surprise for everyone; we weren't due to progress for a few thousand years. In fact, me and my sister had sort of dropped out of education for ever; and the old lady, Hellenic, would sooner have died than taken another exam.

But for the youngsters, it's premature matriculation; something to be proud of. They all throw their pretend mortarboards in the air, and give a very real cheer; a ringing chime. A peal of bells; good God, is it time for church already? The campanology is calling us to morning prayer.

As my mind turns instead to a mitre-shape, fast as stone, an arch by which to enter the temple; it may seem that our days are one long round of work, a grinding circle of service; from class to church to day centre, broken by the occasional dream. But trances are very refreshing, and while one of us is working, the other two are getting the equivalent of ten hours sleep.

Anyway, there's going to be a party soon, so we've got that to look forward to. Open air do, with water blue as a swimming pool, and red hot BBQ.

But I've got the equivalent of a sung mass in Latin to get through first. The family that are coming are very religious. Two of their sons are priests, and they run an important church in another neighbourhood. It's more of a cathedral actually, and they're on very good terms with what you'd call the Bishop.

Juno and Hazel depart for a deep trance, and I begin quietly chanting the entrance antiphony. My mind has been full of noise, from the poetry of a past-life lunatic, to the latest news of a singalo revolutionary. Now as I sit, I become aware of layer upon layer of mental clutter; a snippet of someone singing opera, a kitchen sink drama, a droning documentary about organic farming.

It is just like having a radio in my mind that, if left unattended, will crackle between stations with a hissing tinnitus. I have to sit and listen to it for a while to tune it in properly, and finally turn it off. Humming hymns does help me to still the dial and steady the ariel.

As my mind gets quieter, my inner sanctum gets clearer. At first it's all dark, but gradually a ring of candles grows around me, bringing enough light to

the sacred space for me to see the stained glass windows. At first they are dull, but my continued chanting blows the dust off. It's a long process, from opaque to illuminated; but when I get to the end everything starts to happen at once.

The spotless windows sparkle, lighting up the church with brilliant colour; telling a stained glass story around its walls. The scenes depict the arrival of the Bingen family in vivid detail.

At the same moment the Bingen family actually arrive. Because there's eleven of them, and only one (in three) of me, they had to wait till I had cleaned the windows before the church was bright enough for them to see a way in.

The glass scenario shows a night-time stable with cattle nibbling grass so green it can only be a dream. A family trio, two sleeping, snoring away in the manger; one between them, kneeling in prayer. In the sky above this setting, a bright star; coming through the stable door, wise men bearing gifts. Each has the face of a Bingen boy.

On another window, shepherds watch their flocks; also played by members of the family. Kneeling between Juno and Hazel who are unmoved as a pair of sheep, I throw my hands in the air with the awe of the moment as their oldest son appears in a stained glass scene above the altar. Benedict Bingen.

He's the man beside the crib. Robed as brown as the ox and ass. He comes like Joseph to my Mary, dressed in blue. We have matching halos: he would have made a great father. I prefer Mr Bingen to my immaculate match, the mating that heaven has ordained but the Real World will hardly recognise. If only he could be my Joseph; the acceptable face of my relationship to the infinite.

In my panic, and urge to please him, even though it isn't really time for another confession, I blurt out:

"Forgive me, for I have sinned."

"Ooh. What have you done?" asks Benedict Bingen.

I burst into tears.

"I've had a Maternity Message," I sob.

"That's not a sin, ducky," says Benedict.

"But...but I always thought the Lucky Man would be you," I sniff.

A priest like me, well spoken (that's what his name means), good family. What better way to raise a child in the sight of gods.

"It is not our place to choose the paternity of a child," says Benedict.

"I know, but I thought the gods would have jumped at such an appropriate coupling."

"Now you're sinning," says Benedict.

"Sorry," I sob.

"We'll put it down to the UTR," he replies. "Try not to upset yourself. You still have important mating to do."

"So who is the Lucky Man then?" asks his mother, Hilda Bingen, curiously. She knows where I'm coming from. She always thought her son and I would make a lovely couple.

"Mother! It's not particularly polite to ask," says Benedict. Then he says to me; "Keep the sermon brief, and we'll be on our way. I expect you're itching to reproduce."

"It does feel rather pressing," I admit.

Shame not to press against him, though. I've often imagined it, insofar as a proper couple can: but now I know there'll never be a naughty annunciation, a saucy nativity scene, or a second coming of any sort to make Benedict Bingen love me. It isn't meant to be.

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In a good light, we can see what you're thinking. Sunlight, lamplight, candlelight, because your thoughts are so obvious.

Take this girl, sitting in that flat. Desire superimposed on her cool demeanour; against the dark background, a neon flash of spirit, a special aura outlining the normal shape of woman. Much brighter than the computer screen, her secret fancy shows up like ultra-violet. It's all about the man downstairs.

She likes him more than he likes her. How can we tell? It's easy; with you people there are only two possibilities. Any physical symptom will reveal who likes who, from the size of the pupils to the sweatiness of the armpits.

Alison yawned and stretched at her desk. All was quiet down below. Her housemates hadn't woken up yet. They went back a long way, her and the particular guy. She loved him when he grew his first facial hair, he liked her when she had her first period. They were never children together, though.

Close, so that she could burst in singing while he was in the bath; but not close enough to do a duet in the shower.

He could hook her into an evening gown, but not unhook her bra at the end of the night; unless she was really drunk, and he was putting her to bed, which had happened sometimes. It was only the fact that he didn't fancy anybody else, or never said so anyway, that kept Alison's dreams in that department alive. As a writer, she really fuelled her own imagination. It would take more than a man's lack of awe to make her give up her fantasy.

There's no resignation in the real world; we can't leave work till it's done. If one of us walked away from a job that wasn't finished, it would follow; one way or another, the position wouldn't let us go.

At the residential centre where Hazel works, a circle is growing around us, a ring of expectant singalo faces all focussed on my sister. Her post is fixed by them; only an axe could change that, and as you already know, we don't have such sharp edges on our planet.

There is job avoidance in the real world, though. There is vocation prevarication. Hazel is about to start the art therapy, but before the session begins, I see that he isn't there again; my special match is missing. I may be accepting my fate, but the green-eyed man seems to be hiding from his.

"Why doesn't he come?" I ask a general, mental question; half expecting Juno will answer it, half Hazel.

"Have faith, you're a priestess," they both say.

In a good light you can see that our pain is just like yours. Real or human, spirit or flesh; rejection stings whoever you are, thick-skinned or skinless.

Being of the second kind, I can really feel it when Hazel aims the entire art therapy session at me. The colours seem to go inside. Yellow mellows to orange, slowly as an ovum ripening. It takes forever for the orange to bleed into red, an exercise in waiting.

The red comes like an unwelcome period, a bloody no when you wanted a positive result in the pregnancy test. It underlines the fact that I urgently need to mate.

There is a flower only women see
Bloom of happiness or misery
Red, predictably, as the rose
Bloody tissue blossom:

Hazel sings, which doesn't help much. But then the red deepens to purple, taking me to a place where virtue becomes vice, and Faith and Patience are characters in a bawdy Victorian whore-house. Purple is a sofa beyond polite control. It's the spirited seat of sexuality.

My sister's purple cushions me in style. She sings elegant arms around me, a high back, strong but shapely Queen Ann legs. Her purple is silk brocade against my imaginary skin, embossed with patterns abstracted from the shape of female reproductive organs; the vine-tendrils of fallopian tubes, the clam-shell symmetry of the womb, the lotus-flowering of labia. There are tassels such as a queen may wear on her nipples.

They swing as Hazel sings again:

Oh God let me be pregnant
And if the heavenly gardener is willing
The loo-roll poppy will not flower again
Until it announces the birth

I sit on the throne of my higher self, confidently omniscient, adequately powerful. When the art therapy session ends I feel inspired to face the task ahead. We'll have to go and find him, face that door I couldn't get through before. Instead of leaving the centre for distressed singalos after the class, we go further in, to the residential section. The corridors of powerlessness.

Now I know why the singalo girl looked drunk as she struggled to come up my aisle. The three of us are staggering like teenagers who've shared a can of cider at the seaside and gone to the fun fair. The entrance to the singalo home is like a hall of mirrors, full of illusion and distortion, false turnings and dead endings. It offers us a choice of passages, all with dizzying perspective.

"It's that way," says Juno.

"No, let's take this one," says Hazel.

We are giggling helplessly. The irresistible urge to reproduce, and the illicitness of the situation, is making us silly. We manage to enter the maze at three different points, and come together clutching our sides at an intersection. Then we wander, hopelessly lost, round endless bends.

At length, I spy someone, crossing our path on a corridor that meets ours. I recognise her from the art therapy sessions; Surely, I think she's called. A lady who never stops knitting. She has a skin complaint, a bit like your eczema; so bad it has covered her mouth and sealed her lips. Though she can't talk she might be able to point us to the right door with her needles.

We follow her so slowly, though, that another figure catches up first, appearing from the other end of the corridor. The flitting shape approaches the non-speaking singalo rapidly.

"You know who that is, don't you," I gasp. "The singalo girl who's been trying to come to church."

"Ask her where his room is," says Hazel.

I open my mouth and try with all the force of my UTR to get a sentence out, just something simple, like 'excuse me please, can you tell me the way to the green-eyed man'. I use all my strength, but the words fall short, and end up lying gelatinous on the floor. Proper thoughts can't become concrete speech in the abstract air of the singalo centre.

Surely doesn't even notice the doomed tadpoles of my question wriggling toward her, as the singalo girl whispers in her ear. I watch and shiver to see; it's a repeat of something I've seen before, and a premonition of something to follow. But what is the singalo pilgrim saying; story or secret, promise or threat, to the woman who never speaks?

"Hey, let's try this way!" Hazel has been exploring another avenue in the crazy house, a corridor leading to the right.

I get that fairground feeling again, as we enter its tunnel. Like I paid fifty pence, a cheap ride, to scream the length of this corridor, with the haunted howls of inmates coming from the doors we pass. Then my sister stops dead and says:

"This is it. I'm sure it's his."

"How can you tell? They all look the same to me."

It must be her artist's eye. This painted vortex isn't different from the

others. No doubt you give your doors numbers, or colours, or decorate them with knobs and knockers to stand out from the ones on either side. In dreams we can nearly do that too. But in the Real World, we are our own next-door neighbours; not even semi-detached.

I verge on the omnipresent, but it's impossible for me to enter somebody's private place. It's so personal. Where you might smell fresh paint or wood polish, and brasso on the knockers; I'm getting pure groin. The pheromones are enough to lock me out.

I step backwards.

"Are you alright?" says Juno.

"I've got to get out of here," I gulp.

She can see I'm having a panic attack. They're a symptom of advanced UTR. Many women never get them because they mate in the early stages; panic attacks come when they start to feel it's getting too late.

My body clock is actually ticking, audibly so everyone else can hear it too. The seconds start to speed up, miss beats, syncopate into sentences; 'Angela can't get pregnant! She's never going to mate!'

I pace up and down the corridor outside the chosen man's room; my nervous ticks punctuated by the real ticking of this clock. But Juno's maternal mechanism easily over-rides mine.

Hustling her babies under her wing, she bustles me and Hazel out of the building; like a mother hen she finds our way home, even though in these conditions it is impossible for us to fly.

"I must go back and try again," I cry.

"Not now, dear," she clucks. "We're off to a party."

*

Tonight's party is the dream of a barbeque. We fall asleep to the quiet pop of the first beer-can ring pulled, the soft hiss of the first burger-fat drip on hot coals, the sizzle of sun cream slipping on warm skin. This is exactly the kind of break we need.

My pregnant friend Madge and I sit in deckchairs on the patio by the pool, sipping non-alcoholic wine and swapping notes. We haven't met since she got

her maternity message.

"I've felt so queasy," Madge says, "but every time I see a baby I want to eat it."

"I've been sick too," I reply. As have my female relatives, in our hormonal trips down the singalo centre corridors, so I don't know if this counts as true UTR.

"I feel like a trumpet constantly blowing, or a cock constantly crowing," she says. "Know what I mean?"

I nod silently.

"I'm all mouth," she goes on. "I keep putting my foot in it."

"So, how's it going with the Windsaws then?" I ask her.

"Slowly but surely," she replies. "Willyum and I have had a couple of preliminary dates, and we're hoping to mate by about this time next week."

"Are you excited?"

"Angela," she says. "It's not particularly polite to ask."

Hazel has been splashing around in the swimming pool with Mavis Kennedy and a whole host of young men. Now she leaps glistening out of the water, and stands dripping on the side.

"Are you coming in for a swim?" she shouts at me.

"Do you want to?" I ask Madge.

"No, I don't think so," she replies.

"I'm sure it's safe," I tell her.

"I know," she says, settling back in her deckchair. "But I'm feeling conservative. I'd rather save my energy for labour."

I've had enough of maternity politics. Better to be a floating voter. I climb up the steps to the diving-board.

"Go for it," says my sister encouragingly.

But Madge is going further. She received her message after me, and already has the mating day planned. I haven't even managed to meet my match yet. I'm poised on the edge of the diving-board, slim and sleek; looking nothing like a mother-to-be. More like a porpoise. I dive into the pool, relishing the solo mission. Feeling purposeful, without my family attached to me, I swim into the cool separation.

There is someone lying face down on the bottom. They're barely moving,

only a ripple as I swim closer. In slow-motion I reach out my hand and flip the body over to see who it is.

"Oh," I say, "it's you!"

My man's green eyes are more vivid than ever. He's not dead. This is one match the water can't put out. I hold his hands, anchoring myself above him, and look at his face, white as shells or fish bones, in the waving seaweed of his hair.

"Wow," I breathe, for in dreams we can underwater. (You might believe this because, in dreams, you can too.)

He smiles at me, with coral-reef teeth; crookedly attractive.

"Can you speak?" I ask. Who knows what singalos can do in dreams.

He doesn't answer, but his eyes are so bright with understanding, that I'm sure he can't be completely distressed; a singalo who won't walk or talk under any circumstances.

"Can't you even say wow?" I ask him, squeezing the hands that are holding me under water.

He seems to nod, then opens his mouth with a W. A bubble bursts from his lips that swallows my head, like an old-fashioned diver's helmet, a fishbowl full of air. My grip on his hands slips, as I'm buoyed up towards the feet of the swimmers, kicking at the surface of the pool.

While I'm in the bubble, bobbing up through layers of colour, from deep green to light, I have a strange vision. It's like my whole life flashing before me; but it's someone else's life I'm seeing, my singalo mate's.

His mother died when he was a baby. Hooray! My match was not born a singalo. He is biologically a Proper Person. He was once part of an idyllic family, living in what you would call a little house on the prairie. He had brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, a grandmother and great-grandmother and, of course, his beloved mama. It was a natural, proper existence.

Oh, the love that flows through the cords of a happy family. It's no coincidence that the colour of it translates as gold; the most precious thing we know. The creamy yellow of warm milk, mother of all nourishment; that's no coincidence either. It's all planned. Through the channels, a stream of perfect imagery flows; ideas that have already been realised fully, reassembling themselves in inspired flashes, at the other end of that cord.

It's good to know that my man was once a part of the complete picture. He

wore his halo like a straw hat, and went bare foot instead of winged; but he was still closer to angel than human, native to the Real World. At home on the vast open plains of our existence, at one with the animals.

You've got to love our animals; they're not like yours. They are not food for us, slaves for us, possessions or playthings. We don't think we're better than them. We don't treat them to jewelled collars, cute toys or expensive cuts of meat; and we don't mistreat them either.

No downtrodden seaside donkey, no dobbie; think Pegasus instead, who stamped out the Hippocrene spring, the fount of inspiration, for the Muses on the mountain.

Our horses can fly. They don't have wings, any more than we do, but they can fly. And the heavenly prairie is their domain as well as ours. They, too, have the right of way.

It was a traffic accident, that day on the plain, when my man was a baby; a collision, our biggest cause of premature death. A family of horses cavorting in joy, crashed into a family of proper people flying the other way. In fact, they were flying the same way; happy and free of care, at one with everything which is why they didn't see each other coming.

Most of the horses died too. The bigger ones could have survived the impact, but the foals were fatally injured and it spread through the cords to the entire family. In the people's case, though, some of the children were tiny enough to have avoided injury. It was the key adults, mothers and grandmothers, who bore the brunt of the crash. The family died from the centre outwards, relations were severed as the cords rotted; only the smallest children were fresh enough to survive for a while.

The baby hermetically re-sealed; my special singalo was re-born as an individual, before he'd had time to get to know his family. Born again, but this time on his own. My last image is of him lying alone on the endless plain, crying. Before the underwater 'wow' bubble bursts, I see him weeping for his lost kin. It shows he had a proper soul.

When I break the pool's surface, there's a ring of anxious faces around me. "We thought you'd drowned," Hazel says.

"But this is a dream," I reply. "We can breathe under water."

"But this is a dream," Mavis Kennedy says. "Anything can happen. You

could have drowned."

Juno is sitting on the side of the pool, swinging the pair of mermaid's tails she's got for legs.

"Even if you drowned in the dream," she shrugs philosophically, "you'd be alive when we wake up again."

"Or would she?" Mavis says, diving under with a splash.

I climb out of the swimming-pool and burst into tears.

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" everyone asks me worriedly.

I can't answer them. I stand with my bare feet on the sun-warmed patio, and feel the water streaming down my body.

"Have a drink," says Madge, offering me something non-alcoholic.

I snatch some wine from the table by the barbecue, instead, and sob into the glass.

"It's the UTR," everyone is saying now. "Don't worry, this too will pass."

I walk away from the patio, onto the grass, and stand there, lost in the feel of the lawn under my feet. Behind me, I hear the plash of people in the swimming-pool, the clink of ice in drinks.

It is an extraordinary coincidence. My father was killed in an accident too. There are not many accidents on this planet, and the fact that both he and my singalo's mother died in one makes me believe that our match is really meant to be. We have so much in common.

My father was one of a family of scientists, who were attempting to reproduce animals mechanically. These scientists were mostly men (who wanted to be like women), and non-church goers (who wanted to be like gods). Their creation, ironically enough, was a mechanical horse.

My father was testing the prototype. It might be hard to picture this invention, but hopefully it will help if I say bicycle. For, you see, the idea was that mechanimals could help people get around quicker than before. His family were just trying to find out how fast they could go. We would watch them pedalling in convoy across the sky, skidding across the astral plains.

The bicycles weren't much to look at; as inferior in beauty to our horses, as your wheeled steeds are to real stallions. I'd have to say, though, that our bikes would pip your horses to the post.

Imagine an equine skeleton fashioned from crystal, each bone and

vertebrae flawlessly transparent and sparking with an individual fire. And imagine each vein, each artery, each nerve and muscle sinew a skein of different coloured silk, for the rider to hold like reins; looped at the horse's neck, where all the threads came together, soft as a mane.

These contraptions could travel at speed, the well-oiled legs could wheel and gallop and fly through the sky like a real horse. But when Hazel and I met our father on his, he made it stand still enough to be petted, and it submitted to his control like a real horse never would.

The legs that had been pistoning across the prairie were cold to the touch, though their diamond-hard bones glistened, giving the illusion of perspiration. The flanks quivered, though it was the soulless reflex of a machine. I remember being dazzled by it, though we knew it wasn't alive.

"It's blind," little Hazel said, poking its crystal eye-sockets.

"But I can see where we're going," laughed Dad. That was the last time we saw him. We watched him pedal away on the horse's back. He turned around and waved goodbye.

I say that's the last time we saw him, but on this planet you know we don't really have time, except in dreams. And that is why it's pointless to try and travel faster than we can travel. Speed is not something we can master; it is the master of us.

No one witnessed the accident. Some people reported a flash of light in the sky, thundering hooves. There was a storm, a rainfall of crystal shards, and corpses crisp as burnt leaves, but they never found my father's body in the debris. I think he pedalled himself off the wheel of reincarnation.

Telepathic even when we're not attached, my mother calls me, from the barbecue beside the swimming-pool; reminding me that fire and water are both scarce as our dreams, so I should make the most of them while I'm here. I shake off the aura of death and sniff the aroma of life.

We never eat meat, not even in our sleep, but there are some wonderful vegetables cooking on the coals. I step back onto the hot patio stone, and give myself over to sensation. Sizzling as they're char-grilled are the ingredients of colour; aubergines, corn on the cob, sweet peppers and succulent mushrooms. Sun-dried tomatoes, spiked with chilli; griddle-striped zucchini. All drizzled with a golden stream of olive oil infused with herbs; new-torn leaves of parsley and basil,

nature's free sachets of flavour.

On our planet, there is fruit that breaks open like a loaf of freshly-baked bread, fruit that's full of milk to drink. Fruit that's creamy, fruit that cleanses a saturated palate. Fruit with seeds that sparkle like stars as they burst in your mouth, fruit oozing with nectar that runs down your chin, fruit that you can plunge your whole face into like a basin of ice-cold water.

Fruit and vegetables are one of the main reasons I believe in God. Only a perfect process could have produced them. The extravagance of a bunch of grapes, the humour of a hand of bananas, the tenderness of strawberries, the thrust of rhubarb; the antiseptic spray of a lemon. Only Gods could have provided for us with such all-round grace.

As I eat the food, my glowing body grows more solid. A feeling of well-being comes over me. The whole group of us, lounging on garden furniture, start to giggle and burp as the digestive process begins. In our dream intestines, in the stomachs that wake up when we go to sleep, there is a rumbling. Fruit is squeezed of its juice, pressed for vitamins and wrestled of its fibre. When the digestive process is over, we pause for a moment. Then everyone rushes off into the bushes on the perimeter of our dream, where the opposite of eating occurs; a private event, equally pleasurable.

I don't know how you can do this every day. But if you don't mind my saying so, some of the stuff you eat is crap. Some of it is plastic. Take a handful of sweets, factory replicas of the fruit sensation; they may be fizzy at first, but they stay forever like non-biodegradable wrappers in your system. Proper food makes itself in fields and on trees.

My family and friends wander off into the bushes but I stay and gaze into the fire. More matter turning into energy, the warmth of it seems to put a physical body on me. Warm skin, on muscle, on bone; warm blood moving in veins, warm breath moving in lungs; I can feel a pulse in my throat, in my thigh, in my temple; in parts of my body that heat doesn't usually reach.

The fire is making my eyes water, and though I normally see without eyes, it blurs my vision. There are scenes unfolding in the flames, pictures of people and places; it's the next instalment of my singalo's lifestory.

A proper family found him as a baby, crying on the open plain, and could tell by his wound that he was a Proper Person too. A healing knot in his stomach;

you would call it a navel.

They took the orphan in and tried to raise him as their own; but if proper people adopt a singalo child they can't fly with it. They did try, for my boy; made a sling out of their umbilical cords to carry him in. But when they fell asleep it left him alone because he couldn't go with them on dreams. They'd wake up to find him half-strangled by their flexes and about to stick his fingers in their power source.

It was too dangerous, so he had to go to the Centre for Distressed Singalos. And that is where he found his feet. All sorts of singalo sport is taught at the centre, games that proper people couldn't possibly join in. Of course we might kick a ball in a dream, but even that is more of the mind than the body.

Singalos compete with each other, individually or in teams, in endless physical challenges involving balls, or cups, or both. They've got so many ways to put a spherical object in a hole that their entire society revolves around it.

The flashback in the fire shows me scene after scene of my prize male hitting a ball with a bat, a racquet, a club; and some distant friend or foe catching it or missing it or hitting it back. In the flickering flames, I watch him score a goal for the red-hot team, or score a try for the yellows; and what singles him out from the other singalos are those winky green eyes. He's a winner; I see him kissing a gold cup as the fire dies.

When the rest of the people in my dream start coming back from the woods in dribs and drabs I decide that it's my turn to go. I saunter across the damp grass, acknowledging the light-hearted greetings of my family, ignoring their warnings to hurry up.

The sun, which has been in the sky for the duration of our dream, is getting low. The trees are falling into shadow. I move slowly, marvelling at the detail of everything; at how the dimensions of this physical reality are sustained even in the dark.

Every leaf has veins to pump life-blood to its furthest points; each corner is supplied. Even the dead and decaying leaves on the forest floor are attended to by tiny insects. They dismember the skeletons, lay to rest the ghosts of fallen foliage; bring everything back to nothing, ashes and dust.

So I have come to feed the earth in return for the earth feeding me. I dig a

hole in the wood and exchange the beautiful shapes and colours of fruit and vegetables for a black mass, best buried deep. Like the woodlice I'm part of nature's project, transforming matter into energy and back again. What I leave behind me is food for the roots of trees; but I'm under no illusion as to who's the more brilliant magician of the two.

I turn fruit into shit; the trees turn shit into fruit.

Still, I enjoy my work. At the purging end of the digestive process, I squat and push. The word grunt was invented for this moment, no matter what the tales of pigs or ogres might suggest. With that and the odd groan of satisfaction, I am lost in this most basic of jobs; meditating at the bottom line of existence.

Still straining gently I wake up to find that I've voided it all; my physical form, the shadows of trees and the detail of leaves in the wood, they've all slipped away. The party is over, the fire is out, the water has evaporated. The frolicking beings who eat and drank and made merry on cool damp grass and warm patio stone, are proper people again, joined together in families; almost invisible, and insensible to touch.

Already it all seems so ridiculous, the shape of the bananas, the size of the insects, me and Juno and Hazel separate from each other; Madge Kennedy sitting in a deckchair and Mavis diving into the swimming pool. The only part of the whole dream I can relate to now I'm awake are the visions of my singalo I saw under the water and in the fire. The story of his life, I'm convinced is true.

I lie for a while where I fell asleep, our family so close to the Kennedys we're almost touching. Pictures are flickering through my mind; the orphaned baby, the fostered child, the institutionalised teenager.

Then I become aware that Mavis Kennedy has sat up and is staring at me strangely. Well not at me, as such, but at the thoughts I'm thinking; the disturbing images of my singalo male.

"Hey, Madge, look at this," she gasps.

Madge sits up and gasps too.

"My gods, Angela," she declares, "your heavenly match is a singalo."

"I know," I mutter.

"Have you only just found out?" asks Madge.

"No, I've known for a while," I say. "I was trying to keep it to myself, so I could get my head round it."

The rest of the Kennedy clan are rousing themselves now, the news about my green-eyed mate spreading like wildfire from mind to mind. None of them comment on the colour of his eyes; they're all caught up in the horror of his single status.

"He wasn't born like that," I find myself saying apologetically. "He was severed from his proper family in an accident."

"But it's not possible, is it," says Mavis, "to mate with a singalo?"

"We've heard of several recorded cases," Juno exaggerates calmly.

"I guess only special people are destined to reproduce in that way," adds Hazel.

This revelation has come at a bad time for the Kennedy family. Uncle Ray has been following a religious scandal, the whisper that's becoming a myth, the rumour that's getting vicious. He is full of anti-singalo feeling.

"One of the buggers is going around telling all the others the name of the third God!" he says.

"It's not your one, is it?" asks Madge.

"I don't think so," I say.

"We don't even know if he can speak," says Hazel.

"Oh dear, is he in the Distressed Centre?" asks Do Kennedy, mouthing the key words silently.

"Is that where you met him?" asks Mavis.

"We've seen him there," I say, "but I've only met him in dreams, and then not formally."

"These singalos are really getting above themselves," Ray rustles angrily, like a newspaper; today's big story.

"How in Lee and Sheela's name will you be able to mate with him?" Madge says.

"I have no idea," I reply.

"But we're just off to school," says Mum, "to ask some little children."

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"So," she says, when the kids are sitting quietly in their trances; "who has failed to fulfil their fate, and mate with their chosen partner?"

There's a long silence. Some of the adults shift awkwardly in their seats. Then a little girl pipes up.

"It's not possible. You know the pregnancy prayer," says Galatea, two toffee-coloured plaits nearly reaching her waist. "Nothing is asked of you but that which you could do."

"Yes," says Mum, "but in all the eras of your expertise have you ever known a fated mating to fail?"

"I have," says Spiros. He is a greasy teenage boy, almost too big to be conscious in class.

"Would you care to share it with the rest of us?" asks the teacher.

In a voice that's about to break, Spiros narrates an epic tale; it's in iambic pentameter, a massive classic you might have to switch off:

There was a time when singalos were few
and far between, when proper families
occasionally came unstuck or fell
apart in accidental divorces,
but rarely did separation occur
unless it happened at the hand of Lee,
in acts which smacked of showing off, or in
dare-devil stunts; and though at first it seemed
that there would never be more than a few
isolated cases of singalo
life forms on the proper person's globe,
they soon began to mate amongst themselves
until there was a population boom.
A male and a female singalo
could make a singalo baby with ease
could fashion its crude shape as if in clay
and make it walk and talk and join in sports
with prizes for the ones who did the best.
The species may have been quite shallow but
they loved their kids and would do anything
to keep them safe and well; the problem was

a disagreement deeply held between
singalo males and females as to how
the children of the species must be raised.
The men assumed the method should be tough,
survival tactics learned by sweat and blood;
the women tried a little tenderness
on the assumption that the world would be
a better place if everyone agreed
to be nice to each other. But in time
the sexes split, going their separate ways.
The women lived a life of cups, the men
a life of balls; but both needed children
and so both sexes nurtured and murdered,
went out to hunt and stayed at home to cook,
in the process of bringing up their young.
This forged a future for their race in which
the sexual differences were less pronounced,
and as the two genders blurred into one
it got more difficult to reproduce;
they had to mimic each other's best traits
in acts of transvesticism or drag.

There was, of course, an alternative way
to re-invest in the eternal source,
to give the kids a better start in life
with structured love and family support;
to mend the rift with proper people, and
repair the split with their posh ancestry.
If singalos first came about by a
great falling out of proper people's trees,
then surely the way forward was to mate
with members of a real family
to join again with original folk
to make a match with someone who has good

connections. It happened that a man called
Bob, who, weary of cross-dressing, was
considering this option seriously;
and though it wasn't the done thing, Bob hoped
that being a bit of a 'Properphile'
collector of angelic artefacts
he stood a chance with someone beautiful.
With singalo luck, perhaps a lady
of the proper persuasion would see fit
to mate with this not-unattractive male
who happened to be unattached right now.

He came across a family at play
in hazy open spaces, pure azure;
a group of gazelle could not have more grace
than these almost-invisible creatures,
chew more contentedly upon the cud
of virtual foliage, or quietly graze
the half-imagined grasses of the plain.
They were perpetually poised for flight,
and though they shone with luminous allure
the brightest thing about them were the cords
which, linking each to each, with winking lights
and pulsing colour transmitted their thoughts
in secret language to one another.
Bob, the sturdy singalo, had never
dreamed that such insubstantial beings
could stir desire in his solid bones.
He crept closer. They did not hear him come.
"They're lost," he thought, "in their own inner world
of harmony, community; the blood
that courses phosphorescent through their cords
is thicker than the singalo life-force;
but why must I resign myself to fate,

and grow more watery each time I mate?"
With hardening resolve, on hands and knees,
Bob crept a little closer to them still;
and ignorant of his approach they stayed
in bright glades where they stood and locked the horns
of their surpassingly powerful minds.
With physique far outweighing intellect,
Bob's purpose stiffened; "I am going to get
one of those proper people, get them all,
to bear my child, to raise my kind, to make
my likeness in a proper form. I will
impregnate a heavenly body,
with salt and sweat and soil and my seed.
They may not let me watch my baby grow
but somewhere, generations down the line,
the matter that now makes me singalo
will be re-routed into the main flow;
of permanently happy families."
So like a coiled spring he sprang upon
the proper people as they quietly played;
the peaceful glen was shattered just like glass,
and stuff like blood was splattered on the grass.

It is impossible to rape someone
whose body is a figment of their mind,
it is impossible to find a hole.
Impenetrable to such an attack
the proper family refused to crack;
instead they massed their mutual strength against
the singalo, and didn't feel a thing.
A slight disturbance in their personal space,
a little ripple on their family sea,
a hiccup as they took their fill of bliss
in the heathery ether, daisy haze

of their private mental glade; in short
they didn't even notice him, and so
the violence of his act backfired on Bob.
That overwhelming urge to reproduce
resulted in the spilling of his juice
the bursting of him like a big red spot.
From branches of virtually real trees
that fringed the proper people's clearing, hung
his body, like an empty bag; and one
member of the family used it to
carry imagined blackberries home in.

"How do you know all this?" asks Juno of her pupil.

Spiros is red-faced from his strenuous recitation.

"I just happened to be there at the time," he replies.

"One of the proper people in the clearing?" Juno asks curiously.

Spiros nods.

"But you said in the poem that they didn't even notice Bob," says my mother, "so how could his tale have survived till now?"

"We did see him," the boy replies, "we just pretended not to. I swung the blackberry bag with feigned nonchalance, though my hands were covered with blood."

"Were you hurt?" asks Juno, incredulously.

"The blood was mainly blackberry juice," said Spiros, "but the scars took several lifetimes to heal."

These are weary words from a youth whose face is still raw with what you would call acne.

"Nice blank verse," Juno says, "but you haven't answered my question."

"What?" stutters Spiros.

"Well," says Juno, "I asked for couples who failed to comply with reproduction regulations. In your case there was no maternity message. Bob was never meant to mate with a proper person."

Her student's face is almost bleeding now, with embarrassment.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"Don't apologise," Juno replies. "It wasn't a bad piece of work, eh Uncle Zorba?" He was a poet in a previous life, so he should know.

My mum gives Spiros a gold star, more literally than any teacher ever gave one to you.

"For all your poetic devices," she tells, "it was just a simple morality tale."

I think she'd find it a tad more complex if she'd just translated it into the Earthly language. Where's my gold star?

"Let me repeat the question," says my mother. "Has anyone ever received a maternity message, but been unable to follow it through?"

There is silence in the class, both telepathically and out loud. There isn't even any whispering. The students look as blank as blackboards without a word chalked on their faces.

"I'll take that as a no, then," Juno says.

*

In a good light we can see what you're thinking; twilight, streetlight, the glow of a TV screen. Even dim illumination is enough to read your simple expressions. Alison and friends are enshrined on the sofa, gazing at film gods and goddesses.

Theirs must be the muse of romance; Bette Davis eyes, John Travolta chin. Sitting in buttock-worn red velvet, worshipping at the small screen, they pout along with a plot all of them have seen before.

This film is in English. It has not been translated. Anybody who wants to watch it in French or Latin or German, anyone who'd prefer to catch it in Greek or Hebrew or Swahili would need subtitles.

It's the oldest story in the book, though. She loves him more than he likes her. She's dropped everything from hints to hankies; and he hasn't picked up on anything. She's dropped in, a hundred times, to the flat downstairs; and he's never tried to take her upstairs again.

Not pretty enough? She is as plain as a piece of paper. Alison is at her best scribbling away at that attic desk. She wrote all night again, so that's why her eyelids are drooping now. Silly, watching a movie when she could have carried on making epic poetry effortlessly as popcorn. Still, the film challenges her to write a more beautiful ending. They fall in love, get married, have babies; so difficult to

pull off. And then there's the sub-plot:

My Urge to Reproduce is getting so strong that when I erect the church columns for the next service, instead of being straight up and down as usual, they are bulging like pregnant ladies; thicker in the middle.

"Your congregation won't take them seriously," says Juno.

She and Hazel slip smilingly into trances as the members of my church arrive, and I do my best to conduct the service with a straight face.

Some of what I have to say is done with one voice, a monotone; then, as the chant builds, I bring in another tone, a second voice. I sing with two and as the ritual tension mounts a third tone emanates from me. Though, like many priestesses, singing isn't my major strength, I am managing a chord.

When I stop to draw breath, the singalo visitor appears by the font and rushes up the aisle towards me.

She must have been in training for this. Last time she managed to walk a few paces like a dying bride, before collapsing at the second pair of columns. This time she makes it to the third pair, half way to the altar; but there's a change in her tactics.

No longer a bride in ivory rags, wishy-washy all over the floor; she charges at me like a bull to a red flag. No shit, she comes horned and raging.

Her head is down, her hands held up on either side; fingers pointing in my direction, as if to gore. I can see her mouth open, but I can't hear a word she's mouthing. My ears are still tuned to the choir-song of a harp, the mermaid sounds in a sea-shell. The frantic scream of this singalo girl is on a different frequency.

When she gets to the third pair of columns, she looks up; pawing at the stone floor to hold her ground. Her eyes are small and sunken, distorted by my energy field. She looks angry, but actually I suspect she's afraid. I want her to come further up the aisle towards me, but her approach is all wrong. After her previous defeats, at the first and second columns, I can see she's psyched herself up to push, to force her way in. But like Bob, the singalo in Spiros' story, the physical effort works against her. The attack backfires, and she pops like a shot balloon.

Her moon-face disappears and, in its place, a piece of burst rubber with her spooning features shrunk on, does a lunatic flit towards the door. A pale,

fleeing condom ghost, blurred and impotent; the singalo soldier girl is deflated and defeated.

All I can do to help her as she goes is flash an urgent message on the wooden board where hymn numbers are normally recorded.

"Stop fighting," it says. "Surrender and let me suck you in."

It's in a gothic script, to evoke those higgledy hymn numbers in piggedly old chapels for you; but I don't know if she sees it.

None of the members of my congregation seem to notice the singalo's brief appearance in church, but I can't hang about chatting afterwards, so I don't get a chance to find out for sure. As soon as the service is over, my family have to go straight to the day centre. During the flight, I check their memories, to see if they were aware of the girl's presence. Because of their trances they weren't before; but as soon as they feel me poking around in the back of their minds they are.

"What are you looking for?" asks Hazel. "Oh, she came again, did she?"

"Who?" asks Juno. "Oh, the singalo. I wonder why?"

"She looks angry this time!" my sister laughs, watching the action replay.

"It didn't get her very far," Mum says; as the lunar-faced radical pops again.

It didn't get her very near. But far or near, near or far; that is the fluttering sound of us flying too. That's the way it works, by flexing the perspective of space in our faces. Are we moving or not? Sometimes it feels like everything is whizzing past because I am so still.

So either we arrive at the Centre for Distressed Singalos, or it arrives at us. Whichever way, I'm hoping this is the day my prince will come.

"We're here!" sings Hazel, as we alight gracefully in front of the wrought iron gates, landing on tiptoe in a fairy ring.

"If he's not at the session," I whisper, "I'll die."

The family of social workers draw us inside. Dot is in the entrance hall, not spinning.

"Hello," she says.

"Hi," we reply in surprise.

That's nothing to the shock we get as we enter the day room. The singalo

lady who never speaks comes up to us.

"I have a request," she says. "Blue."

"What?" Hazel gasps.

"Do blue. After purple. I know you know want to. We all do."

"Isn't it a miracle!" cry the social workers, rushing up to us. "Surely can speak!"

"How did this happen?" asks Juno.

"We don't know," say the social workers.

"When?" Hazel asks.

"We don't know."

Since we were last here. When secretly, in the dormitories behind the day room, we spied that self-same singalo girl who's been trying to come to church whispering in the ear of the speechless lady singalo. And now Surely can speak.

"I see your eczema has cleared up too," I say to her.

"It was psychosomatic," Surely replies.

This strange turn of events takes us into the art therapy session at a high level of excitement. The yellow is feverish; and as we reach the borderline between orange and red, there's a heat rash. I hear a delirious murmur go round the group. I open my eyes, and burn with shame.

Without realising it, I've been projecting an image of my singalo mate onto the white walls of the therapy room. I am compensating for his absence by beaming him out there, in the lime light of my third eye. He's dressed as a pantomime prince charming, with amber velvet breeches, and a canary yellow feather in his cap.

All the distressed singalos start to laugh and point, recognising their mate too.

"Angela? What does this mean?" asks the head social worker.

"What do you think?" I blush.

"He's your allocated male?" asks Neckola.

"So it would seem," I say.

"That's great!" she replies. "He's a good guy."

"And you know, he was born a Proper Person," says Kneena, quietly.

"Not that we discriminate, of course," says the Head. "Our heartiest congratulations."

"So how can I see him? He hasn't come to a session since I got the message," I say. The words come out in a rush. The relief of having my intentions known is enormous, and the social workers are so accepting of the situation. They are even prepared to abandon the art therapy to let me to reproduce.

"Just go to his room," says Bellynda. "It's in the residential wing."

"We have tried that, actually," Juno blushes. "It's not easy."

"We'll find someone to assist you," says Kneena. "We've got a new singalo helper. She'll show you the way."

"Let's call her," says Neckola.

"All together now," says the Head.

With one voice the family of social workers shout her name. It sounds strange to us; too many vowels, not enough constants, more like an ululation. Something like Eulalie.

"She doesn't respond to telepathy well," they say, "but we're working on it."

Maybe she told her bosses she's not telepathic, but Eulalie doesn't look surprised to see us here. Did she know we were coming closer in her world, like I knew she was coming to mine?

Did she see me in the same premonition I had about her, eons ago? Or did she only click yesterday that the priestess she was trying so hard to reach was in the centre; the art therapist's sister, all along.

I have seen this female singalo crawling on hands and knees to the altar of our Gods, and hurtling down corridors many heavenly levels lower, to whisper in the ears of handicapped singalos. But we've never seen her calmly walking towards us as if she's only doing her job.

The face has been distorted by the strain, or speed, or spiritual struggle, so we've never seen what she looks like properly till now. All previous sightings have been piecemeal; an eyebrow here, a nose in profile there, asymmetrical shoulders so she appeared to be what you'd call a Picasso.

But this time, there are no psychedelic blurs, no pissed spectacles; she's at work, it's the middle of the day. Just a slick of iridescent eyeshadow to keep the blues away. Not green, this singalo's eyes, but they have the same kind of look in them as my man's.

Her gaze moves over my shoulder, where his picture on the wall, in its heroic pose, is slowly fading; and I guess she must meet his gaze there.

"Yes," she says, "I know him."

"Can you take his official mate and her entourage to his room?" ask the social workers.

I can tell as she answers that her mouth is almost real; more of an actual hole than ours. It's the lips that edge this feature; even with their day-coloured make-up, a quick lick of natural pink. They underline her expression, or twist it into italics. They make her mouth a bold jug, from which to pour the purple prose.

"Must I point destiny's way like a signpost?" she pouts, with one hand on her hip, and the other arm sticking out like a teapot spout. "I already spend all my spare time fulfilling fate."

"We'd go ourselves," says the Head social worker, "but the residential centre makes us dizzy."

It's true that parallel lines, from a singalo's perspective, give proper people a headache. I stumble blindly down the corridors after Eulalie, my once clumsy crawler, who is now catwalking, with hand on hip. When we get to the migraine spiral that is my boyfriend's door, Eulalie stands aside, and waits with arms folded for me to knock or enter.

"What's his name?" I ask her telepathically; then remember that she isn't and say it aloud. "What's his name?"

She does not reply, only smiles, twice.

"Come on, let's just get in there," says Mum.

Suddenly, with a surge of power, we're the police breaking his door down. We're wearing riot gear, full body armour, with force-fields. We've got whistles of righteousness, truncheons of light; we're proper people, and the law of physics is on our side.

But we can't get into his room.

"Shall I radio for help?" pants Hazel.

I look at the singalo woman then back at the whirling door.

"No," I say, "let's try harder."

We double our efforts to enter; Hazel with a high-pitched sound like a police siren, Juno with reinforced toe-caps of discipline. I'm trying to gain access with the force of my UTR.

It feels like we are slowly turning a key of stone, but we must look like a load of cartoon cops. Eulalie starts to laugh.

"Stop fighting. Surrender and let him suck you in," she says.

*

I surrender and he sucks me in. The tight corridor squeezes like a muscle and I start to pass through the doorway. There's a beat, a heart valve opening. He pulls me through it like a long dark tunnel. I hear the bump and grind of his music, the metallic tracks, before I see the light at its end. The lyrics have all the rhythm and rhyme of a train:

this is the song of Singalo City
the sound of truth, so it's gonna be gritty
a sight for sore eyes, so it ain't pretty
won't touch your soul 'cos it's only a ditty

I can see my man's lips moving as he sings, but they look out of sync because we're on different wavelengths. He does not stop dancing when I arrive in the room, feet first, with my dragged-through-a-hedge-backwards hairdo; so I stand and watch him for ages. I think pogo is the word for a dance that just goes up and down. He'll certainly make an energetic lover.

I start to giggle nervously. You'd think he hadn't noticed me standing there, caught up in his elasticated choreography, but he does see me between bounces. He meets my gaze, in the troughs of his dance, and between the ceiling peaks.

I start to giggle because suddenly everything seems funny: my urge to reproduce, the panic approach to his door, and the ease with which I slipped through it. Juno and Hazel are flapping uselessly on either side of me now, not so much in a trance as passed out completely.

Everything I had clenched, relaxes as I watch my mate boogie. This could be it, enough laughter to make a love affair. But babies are not made so lightly. He has to make a move on me.

The longer I wait, the more lingeringly I watch, my serious look grows longer and thinner. Through its telescopic perspective, I see something I never normally do; the passing of time. And as the singalo doesn't stop pogoing for what I now truly understand to be ages, but keeps me standing there till my laughter

has long dried up, waiting for him to speak; the first layer of our relationship is formed, laid down in history like a crust.

"Hello," I say angrily, at last.

He stops bopping at once. "Hi," he replies.

Due to our being on different frequencies, his voice is a boom, mine is a squeak. He could say something else now, like 'welcome' or 'would you like to mate with me?' He could even offer me refreshments, though I don't touch food usually. I've got an inexplicable craving for a late-night bowl of breakfast cereal; golden, baby-shaped flakes with plenty of milk and sugar.

The singalo doesn't propose anything of the sort, but smiles at me engagingly.

'Though his eyes are not as green as in my dream,' I think, 'they're more on the leafy than the nutty side of Hazel.'

In her dribbling stupor, my sister giggles. But if my mister won't speak I'll be forced to squeak again; for it was only the strength of my UTR that got us in here, and I won't be able to leave until that urge to reproduce is assuaged. I need to stare at the ceiling, get carpet burn on my coccyx, and knock china ornaments off the chest of drawers with flailing arms, before I can make my way out of the door.

Not that he's got china ornaments. It's all charts and diagrams, maps and models, decorating his room in the singalo colours, black and white. Singalos can write, if they're not too distressed: proper people don't need to put pen to paper because we can work everything out in our heads. But if this man is able to do complex mathematics from his single cell, he should jolly well be able to manage a simple conversation with me.

Without a word, he turns and fiddles with an abacus of cup shapes and balls, a well-worn piece of equipment that must be made for his most basic equations. It sits on his bedside table, and looks as if he never stops figuring things out on it, day or night. The density of darkness matters as much as the speed of light, and science doesn't stop because he's snoring. I cast my eyes over the apparatus and ask the first stupid question that comes to mind:

"Why's that cup spinning?"

"It's Dot," he replies.

"Dot? But she doesn't spin now," I say.

"Doesn't she?" He touches the tiny cup with the tip of his singalo finger,

and it stops spinning.

"Why don't you come to art therapy any more?" I ask him.

"Been busy," he replies.

"Did you enjoy working with us?"

"It was alright at first, but it's got a bit boring now; too much red and purple, not enough green."

"We can't do green," I protest.

"You should play cricket," he suggests.

I don't really understand this comment, not even in translation. I know cricket is a popular singalo game, but I don't see what it has to do with green.

I wait for him to elaborate. Nothing happens. I wait some more. Time isn't like this on the other side of his door; it happens all at once. We never have to wait for anything.

"I know how much you enjoy sport," I say, to fill the gap.

"I'd certainly like to bowl this maiden over," he replies.

He goes on smiling at me, and all the curves of his singalo body, the entire outline is smiling too. His mouth is curled round the handle of a sentence, clearly preparing to bat the unspoken subject, to introduce the idea of us mating; but he doesn't say another thing.

So I bring myself to squeak again.

"As you can see," I say, "my mother and sister have fallen into deep trances, ensuring us complete privacy."

"That's thoughtful," he replies. Then there is another pause, though he is grinning and nodding madly.

Finally I get it.

"You can't speak until you're spoken to!" I say.

"Finally you get it," he replies.

"Only to me, or Proper People in general?"

"We don't call you proper people," he says.

"Oh?" I want to know more; but I guess my monosyllable doesn't count as a proper question, for he doesn't answer. "What do you call us?" I say.

"Angels," he replies.

Now, before you get too excited let me tell you that it could also have translated as spirits or sprites, the ancestors or the undead. It could equally mean

goblins or ghosts or ghoulies in your language. I chose Angels because then I could call myself Angela. The word the singalo used makes no value judgement, doesn't show proper people as good or evil. In other words, I still don't know if he likes me or not.

Paranoia; I know what that means though. The translator is so nifty with the emotional dictionary; words for every feeling, feelings for every word. We have it by us constantly. It's the king: thesaurus rex.

It can do word association too; irrational anxiety, inexplicable cravings, profound silences, mindless laughing, surreal dancing in my mate's bedroom. Putting two and two together, the state I find myself in can best be defined as stoned.

Of course, I haven't actually taken drugs, nor does the singalo appear to have done so, but something in the airless atmosphere between us, something at our chemical interface is having a strange effect.

I don't know if he likes me, and I know he really loves me. We've barely met, and we've been together for years. We could drop out of each other's address books or we could amalgamate both our social lives into one.

I'm hallucinating; me and him on our preordained first date. It's enough to make my skin break out in goose-bumps big as teenage spots. Next to me, though, my mother and sister are growing up a bit.

"We're stoned," Hazel laughs, "by those who are without sin among us."

"Don't be stupid," Juno still seems relatively sensible. "Just try to keep him talking, Angela. You'll soon find an opening. But start small, and work up to the big question."

I look desperately around the room, at his devices and contraptions. It all looks too scientific for small talk. The simple calculator by his bed is connected by a glowing lead like a neon snake to a vast construction of cups and balls in scaffolding towers over the singalo's living space.

"What is that?" I ask.

"This old thing?" he replies modestly. "It's just astrology for beginners. Bunkum for adepts."

"How does it work?"

"I don't know," he says, "but it does."

"If the spinning cup was Dot," I ask him, "do they all represent a singalo?"

"Yes."

"And are the cups women, and the balls men?"

"Yes."

Now he's giving me straight answers, I should pop the crucial question. But I'm scared he'll say no. If my advances are unsuccessful, I'll be stuck in these vortex doorways and downward spiralling corridors forever.

So I delay asking; and go on looking calmly at his careful models.

"Are they metaphysical or metaphorical?" I ask.

"They're literally neither," he replies.

My eyes widen in awe.

"You understand my question better than I do," I say.

"And you understand my answer better than I do."

A shiver runs through me so deep it gets Juno and Hazel stirring.

"He's ever so special," I whisper to them, telepathically.

"Have you asked him to mate with you yet?" Mum whispers back.

"Oh, no really, Mother, please," I say. "Carry on trancing."

While this silent conversation takes place, in the underground echo-chambers of our minds, I wander around the singalo's room, watching what's happening at the surface of our meeting. The music is still playing loudly; the beat rapped out on something like tin harp strings.

this is the song of Singalo city
can't see it clear 'cos the eye is gritty
can't sing it sweet 'cos the voice ain't pretty
won't make you cry 'cos the lyrics are shitty

Between those words and the loony tune, I hear a distinct click as my singalo mate flicks a switch behind me.

Turning, I gasp at the sight that grows there; a spreading chestnut tree the size of a dining table. Electronic green branches in a lattice of light, from a trunk that seems to have suddenly grown from the floor; but this construction must have been in the room all along, plain as a table leg, until the singalo illuminated it at the touch of a button. I stare in amazement at the sturdy column of green light, supporting the canopy of connections on top.

On the flat surface, in the centre of this network, is something you would call a chess-board. It's chequered with black and white squares; but in the places that you would put human kings and queens and horses, singalo cups and balls are lined up opposite each other, waiting to play.

"What's this?" I ask.

"It's the mating game," the singalo male replies.

I nearly bite my tongue off as he says the word on the tip of it.

"What?" I say.

"The mating game."

"How do you play it?"

"By mating..."

"Is this how singalos do it?"

"No," he laughs. "Singalos have sex."

"Then what is it for?"

"You and me," he says. "We'll have to mate intellectually, because it'll be physically impossible."

"But proper people have sex too," I say in a small voice.

"Not in the same way," he replies.

"How do you know?"

"Well, you're obviously incorporeal."

"Pardon?" I say.

"Clearly. Your bodies aren't real."

"They're real enough," I say, indignantly.

"To mate with another angel, maybe," the singalo replies, "but not with one of us. Do you know what would happen if you and I touched each other like that?"

"Surprise me," I say.

"I'd be smashed to smithereens and you wouldn't feel a thing."

I don't fancy that much. It doesn't sound very sexy, for either of us. But I'm impressed by my special man's knowledge of the ins and outs of mixed-status mating. This is what he's been doing instead of art therapy; devising a solution to our breeding problem.

"So, did you receive a maternity message then?" I ask. No, actually I translated that wrong. "Did you receive paternity post?"

He chuckles.

"My dead mother visited me at night and promised that my children would have a proper mum, like I should have done, a hundred times; but I always thought she was just trying to cheer me up until I started having the recurring dream."

I wait for him to continue, then realise that he can't without another push from me.

"What dream?" I say impatiently.

"I was a shepherd on a hillside," he says. "At first I didn't even know what a shepherd or a hillside was. It was very confusing; especially when you and your mother and sister descended singing from the sky, and announced that I had been chosen to father your child."

"That's beautiful," I breathe.

"It was alright at first," he says, "but it's got a bit boring now."

He gets down on one knee, and looks up at me adoringly. His expression is so urgent I feel sure he'll be able to keep speaking this time; but he can't keep up the dialogue. His mouth moves uselessly, without the input of words from me.

"What are you doing down there?" I sigh.

"I'm proposing to impregnate you at our mutual convenience," he says, rummaging under the table on which the game of mating chess is laid, then thrusting a wad of paper into my hands.

"What's this?" I say.

"The rules," he replies. "You'll need them to play the game. Basically," he points at the cups and balls lined up on the black and white checked expanse, "we have to get each ball into the right cup, in the right order, before fertilisation can occur."

"I don't understand," I say.

"Then read the instructions, and come back when you do," he replies. "Now, shall I escort you to the door?"

I'll never get out of there otherwise. I'm already unsteady on my incorporeal pins, and my legs give way entirely as he stands up and starts coming at me. I only dimly remember what happens next, in the way that you might remember being carried home by a kindly knight after a stoning.

It seems that when I swoon, the singalo is able to touch me without getting scalded. As soon as I relinquish control, as soon as my flame of consciousness is

extinguished, he can pick me up and effortlessly carry me, and my mother and sister, through the door that is now just a simple wooden frame between scenes.

He carries the three of us down corridors that are now straightforward in their angles, as if we were no heavier than a handful of dead leaves. And when he gets to the front door of the residential centre, he shakes us off as one might shake a door mat. We fly into the air, and come to our senses.

Never having left the building in quite this way before, we've never seen the hurly-burly of Singalo City, which exists parallel to the empty spaces of the proper people's dimension. Now, because we've got so close to my singalo, there is a synchronisation of viewpoints, a superimposing of road maps. I can see both the endless plains of our own world, and the intricate tangled streets of his. Simultaneously, I can see relaxed rainbow colours stretching over the surface of our planet; and overcrowded monochrome crouching on his.

We hover between two worlds for a moment, between the music of two spheres. The song of Singalo City is stressed, in cacophonous syncopation with the unstressed; the ambient music of our sphere. Its natural rhythm re-establishes itself as the proper pattern of my brain waves.

The singalo lyrics fade away, but I'm left with a wad of paper flapping in my hand. Singalo city fades away, but I'm left with a big literacy problem. In order to mate with my chosen male I must learn the rules of the game, but I can't read them. I can't read a word, no proper person can; it's pointless if you can read minds. Either we all know something, or it is unknowable.

Singalo City shimmers as if it were nothing but dust in the sunlight, and disappears. In its place we see the glittering prairie, with a proper family in the distance, standing in formation like a barber-shop choir. There are five of them, singing a capella.

"If I'm not mistaken," says Juno excitedly, "that's a message from the Kennedys."

"How can you tell?" says Hazel.

"They're wearing the Kennedy colours," Juno replies.

Indeed they are resplendent in mustard and ochre stripes. Though all proper people appear in shades of yellow and orange, different families are subtly coded; and messengers from us might wear madras-checks in chilli and ginger colours.

Because we can't read and write, we're big fans of what you might call singing telegrams. They add spice to special occasions, and punch to formal announcements.

"Come on then," says Hazel. "Let's hear it."

As we fly towards the proper family, the thumping singalo music lifts like a headache; and the dulcet tones of a barber-shop choir fill the air, conveying an important message from the Kennedys:

At a Quarter to Eight

Come

Come

Come

Come

Come

At a Quarter to Eight

Is going to Mate

Kennedy

Madge

Miss

Madge

Kennedy

Is going to Mate

When the Maternity Message is received, a shag is understood. Then we may allow our gaze to settle on button-flies, or flutter at a hem-line; but we never flirt with strangers. You people look at everyone in a skirt or trousers as a possible conquest. We don't look at anyone like that, until we've definitely got them conquered.

Lust is something humans splash about like cheap after-shave, while we only ever apply it to one point; the pulse. In our whole lives we will only meet one

mate, if we're lucky; you could do that in a single night.

So even though proper people receive sexual instruction from above, we still worry that we're not doing it right. Often we feel ashamed, and try to keep it a fig-leaf secret. But on this occasion, everyone has been invited to see Madge Kennedy mate; so we fly like the wind to make sure we don't miss any of the foreplay.

*

This sex is not in English. It has been translated. It doesn't have French fire, a German physique, or Spanish sauce. This sex can't happen in human terms, so how on Earth will you understand it, if I try to tell how it goes, show how we come.

It's not particularly polite to ask me, anyway. Proper people aren't voyeuristic. We don't like to watch other PPs having S.E.X. Unless we fall into deep trance as soon as it starts, there is a danger of joining in. It can happen so easily to a polymorphous personality. Looking leads to touching.

My mental tentacles would probably make a grab, if I saw men's testicles. Twin orbs of effluvium, spinning slightly asymmetrically, outside of their bodies. The sacs look like silver, threaded with see-through. Their surface moves always, like the cooling story of larva, the poetic movement as molten hardens.

Pardon my front but I couldn't talk about the male member without actually taking hold of it, at some level, and my mother and sister would too. So the public mating of two of the top families in the real world is liable to become an orgy, if the invited audience stay awake. Eyeing leads to fingering.

Having revealed all that a proper man offers, I now give a brief glimpse of the female form. An hourglass of uranium, silvery, crystalline. At the point of nipples, we fade out: the pubis is airbrushed. Because this is the point that anybody watching would start joining in, it's not particularly polite to linger there.

If the sex itself is inexpressible, imagine how ooh... how ahh... how hard it is... to describe... aaiee... the actual moment of orgasm. Yes, in our timeless state every moment could be that ooh... You see, dare to dwell on another couples' pleasure, it quickly becomes a threesome.

So, that scene doesn't bear a second glance; and we move swiftly to the aftermath when Madge, rosy in a damp negligee, makes the rounds of her family

and friends, who are politely applauding.

"How did it feel?" I ask her.

"Spectacular!" she replies. "You'll find out, when you mate."

"I've got to find someone who can read first," I mutter.

"What do you mean?" asks Madge.

"He's given me written instructions," I tut.

"Did you tell him we can't read because our eyes are illusory?" asks Mavis Kennedy.

"No," I say. "I assumed he knew."

"Well, anyway," says Madge, "come and meet Willyum."

The Windsaws are an awesome family; and we've never spoken to them before, but they turn out to be very approachable. They smile as Juno, Hazel and I fly shakily towards them, and hold out their hands as we shyly alight. Ray Kennedy introduces us as their 'great friends', and soon we're all engaged in conversation.

I am cornered, within the family circle, by Willyum's uncle Headwood, a keen theologian. As soon as he hears I am a priestess he homes in.

"Have you heard," he says, "that a singalo girl is going around telling everyone the name of the third god?"

"The whisper has reached my ears," I reply.

"Yes! That's how she does it, apparently," he shouts, "one at a time."

"What do you think she says?"

"It will be a lie," Headwood insists. The fancy outline of his posh soul quivers in indignation. "If there was a leak, and the name of the third god did get out, an unattached female would not be the first to know."

"Why not?" I say innocently.

"Would you believe the word of a singalo?"

Being a theologian, his questions are too complicated for my priestess-simple answers. Besides, he is looking for truth in the hardest place to find it, instead of the easiest.

"Do you know what writing is?" I say. "It's how singalos handle words. They stick them on paper, pin them to pages, put them in books, to be read again and again. They cut words out of the universal conversation, and keep them in line; black twinkling on white."

"So?" Headwood shrugs.

"So," I say, "anyone that committed to making a sentence last for ever must be certain of its truth."

"What are you two talking about?" comes an imperious tone from the head of his family. The matriarch of the Windsaws has overheard us.

Headwood clears his throat.

"Reading and writing," he says, as quietly as you would say 'burping and farting' in front of the Queen.

Poor Madge looks horrified. I can see she thinks I've spilt the beans and brought up the subject of my inappropriate match in polite conversation with her perfect partner's family.

"I haven't," I tell her, telepathically. "We were talking about religion and politics!" But she doesn't hear me, for the screaming embarrassment in her head. I have to speak aloud.

"We were discussing the crisis in the church, Ma'am," I address Mrs Windsaw calmly. "Apparently, a singalo is claiming to know the name of the third god..."

I falter in the face of continued disapproval everywhere I look. Everyone from Madge Kennedy to Willyum Windsaw are silently begging me to shut up, before the gunpowdery old lady's fuse burns any further.

My mum defuses the situation.

"It's been lovely," says Juno, "watching you two young people mate, but now we must be on our way. Angela has a match of her own to make."

*

In the breaks between chapters, Alison had a chance to stop writing; though sometimes she just kept going with the flow. She couldn't wait to find out what was going to happen.

Jotting down some notes in a journal helped her give the impression (and, indeed, the cover was a mini-Monet) of drafting the novel; as if it wasn't just pouring unsolicited from a higher source. What had at first seemed the random narrative of a passing spirit, psychosis in other words, was actually connected to the story of her own life, in depth and in detail. Normally in a writer's notebook the

planning was done before the words appeared glowing on the screen, though. This was fiction in reverse; she was listing everything that was true about the story. For example, her mum was a teacher and her dad did die in a cycling accident. And she was hopelessly in love with somebody on a completely different wavelength. So it seemed this was more autobiographical, less automatic writing.

Alison watched 'Blind Date', eating char-grilled veg and not smoking before setting off for her evening class; this week, How to Write like the Romantic Poets. She would pick up where she left off later:

On the way to school, Hazel teases me.

"Since you got your maternity message," she says, "you haven't flown with your eyes open once."

"Shhh," I say, "I'm thinking."

"How grown-up of you," Hazel continues, in the silly voice that comes from flying with her own eyes open wide.

"Listen," I say, "one of the class was a poet in a previous life."

"So?" says Hazel.

"Poets can read and write," I reply.

Though the eyes of most proper people are illusionary, poets are visionary; their eyes can really see.

"So," says my sister, coming down from her high, "they could decipher the rules of the singalo's mating game."

Juno raises the subject as soon as we land in the classroom.

"Hands up who was a literary genius in a previous incarnation," she asks.

"He was," says the mother of the smallest baby, bouncing it proudly on her knee. "Why?"

"Because today's lesson is about reading and writing," says Juno. "Trances please!"

Parents switch off and children light up, in readiness to begin. Juno draws the learning curves about them, the way your teachers might draw the blinds before a PowerPoint presentation.

"Now," she says gently, to the baby, "I wonder if you can help us solve a little problem."

"I would," says the baby, "but I'm a bit busy. I was just on my way out, actually."

"Where are you going?" says Juno.

"To a past-life reunion," says the baby, "as it happens."

Just like the reunions you have, where old school- or work-mates meet up again further down the line to compare notes; except that, in our case, the sweet reminiscences or bitter recriminations can occur many life-times later.

"You're welcome to come," says the baby.

"All three of us?" says Juno.

"No, just you. You were one of our original circle."

"I wasn't a poet," says Juno.

"No, but you were a poet's sister," says the baby. "And my muse."

See, I said our voices were heavenly; I told you this story was goddess whispered. We're about to meet the sort of romantic poet who loves a real person in place of the myth, though; who rates interpersonal relations above divine inspiration.

"Do you mind if I go?" Juno asks Hazel and I.

"Feel free," my sister replies.

"But while you're there," I add, "get someone to read these rules for me."

Mum looks at the pages of mating instructions I'm holding, as physical as anything ever feels for us.

"They're too solid to take," she says.

"Please use your photographic memory," I beg.

Quick as a flash, Juno takes the lines of sign. Without understanding a word of the squiggly singalo writing, she makes a copy so perfect it could be popped into her handbag.

Several of the members of the Greek family are going to the reunion, too. Besides the baby, there is Uncle Zorba and a couple of second cousins who were on the literary scene.

Everyone else prepares to completely crash out. The state of total unconsciousness is not something we experience very often, only at once-in-lifetimes events like this; and we don't really relish the prospect of oblivion. But no one likes to hold anyone else back, and if a baby announces at the drop of a hat that it's off to a high-brow reunion, the rest of the family drop their previous plans

without a word of complaint.

So my sister and I wait in the black-out, way back stage; unaware of anything until Juno comes back to regale us with her tale of the dead poets:

'The smell was the first thing that hit me, and the strongest. Tallow and inkwells, lavender water and unwashed hair. In that moment it all came back to me, a whole epoch I'd forgotten.

A life, rat-nibbled; runny-nosed and ring-a-rosied. With raw sewage in the street, and the upper crust still sewn into their underwear. When reading wasn't needed, and writing was nonsense; before the muttering masses turned into the chattering classes.

Then I became aware of the sound; the modulated buzz of educated voices, the earnest hum of a hundred heartfelt debates between society's finest minds. Soon I distinguished an individual voice among the intellectual hubbub, raised in gleeful recitation;

My dream of Xanadu came true
from all the opium I ate
the pleasure dome in my head grew
a temple to the altered state
but death was something I slipped through
as simply as a rustic gate

I was exceedingly pleased to hear these husky tones.

"Why Collar-itch, you old dog," I laughed. "I'd clean forgot you!"

"Well, if it isn't the Abyssinian maid," the poet replied. "So glad you could make it."

"Was all this your idea then?" I asked.

He nodded his tousled head and a quill pen fell out from behind his ear. I bet he still had lice breeding like ingenious ideas in those unruly curls.

"So what have you been up to," he said, "since I last clapped my eyes on you?"

"Oh, this and that," I said briskly; "I've been very busy, in fact; back-to-back lifetimes. A monk, a gypsy, a soldier, a single mother; racing from one to the next

as if karma was a drive to the finishing line. How about yourself?"

Collar-itch looked vague.

"I've just been dead, mainly," he said. "I seem to like it better that way. Lying around under trees, staring up at the sky, slowly letting my brain rot. Lovely."

"Been writing much poetry?" I asked next.

"A bit," he replied, "but not like I used to. The rhythm is irregular, and the rhyming is ever so corny."

We were interrupted then by a loud cry of "Luvie!" from Laud Biro; the great poet who is a tiny baby in our current incarnation.

"Look," Biro nudged a fellow bard who was standing beside him, "it's your sister!"

The third poet, my brother's name translates as Pussy Fish Jelly, but that just sounds stupid.

"Regard a whole poetic movement," Biro greets me with an overdone shudder, "all standing around lifelessly."

"I'm amazed to see Collar-itch," I said.

"He looks dreadful," said Biro, striking a more lurid attitude still.

"His poem was shite," said Jelly.

"It's exactly what I would have expected," said Biro. "A hollow echo of his former hallucination. But I didn't expect him to look so dreadful. The opium was his downfall, you know."

"I thought the way I died was rather appropriate, given what Missy Sissy here used to call my little problem," said Jelly. "If I hadn't drowned when I did, I would have drunk myself to death."

"What about me?" The Laud struck another Biroesque pose. "It was all such an anti-climax. I'd hoped to go out gloriously, fighting some vain war between two foreign armies; at least getting some tension out of my system. And what did I die of? A cold!"

"It was a fever," said Jelly, flatteringly.

"It was not a fever, I was just chilly," stormed Biro. "It was a poxy cold!"

"Highness, keep thy hair on," said Jelly.

"And that's another thing," said the Laud, abruptly resuming an earlier argument, "Collar-itch is riddled with lice."

We all turned at once to look at him, across the musty reunion room. He met our gaze.

"Gentlemen," he said, "would you care to join us in poetry?"

A posh looking chap stepped forward beside him.

"Wordsword!" we gasped. "Is it really you?"

Another great poet, and close personal friend of Collar-itch: I couldn't believe I actually knew these people in a previous life. Then another familiar face appeared beside Wordsword's; his sister, Dorothy. (Her name just seems to translate in one piece, easily as a house caught up in a twister to Oz.)

"It's great to see you all again," I faltered in the face of so many cultural icons. But behind me, Laud Biro and my brother sniggered disrespectfully. Nothing changes. They were ever anti-establishment.

"We thought it would be nice," said Collar-itch, "to recite a few of our recent poems. Just to see where each other is at, creatively."

I nudged Jelly.

"Okay," he muttered, reluctantly.

I kicked Biro on his club foot.

"Ow! Okay," he said.

People on the fringes of the circle started to crowd in appreciatively.

"Mr Jelly," Collar-itch bowed deeply, "please give us the immeasurable pleasure of hearing you speak first."

My brother bowed back.

"It would be a privilege," he said, "to recite my most recent work, Ozymosis."

The crowd applauded politely. Jelly spoke:

I met a traveller from an antique land
who said, in tones of venerable disease
that he could read the poetry in sand
and stories tell from whispers on the breeze
When he recited one such tale offhand
It seemed to come, like wind, from far away
And ripple with supernatural design
The better to a human truth convey

Although the story-teller was divine
The traveller spoke through lips fashioned of clay
"Look on my works, ye mighty smith of words
and make them yours, take them by craft or fight
your pen-name is much mightier than swords
art is on your side, and copyright:
who will believe a madman made it up?"

There was enthusiastic applause, and cries of bravo.

"Laud Biro," said Collar-itch. "Would you do us the enormous honour of reciting a recent ode?"

Biro started to stare moodily into the middle distance. He always used to do this before he spoke, as a dashing young poet. But the pause lasted longer than it used to. The silence went on and on. Eventually Collar-itch said, "Laud Biro?" again.

"I can't," said Biro. "I haven't written a single poem since I died."

"Oh dear," said Collar-itch.

Wordsword and his sister Dorothy drew closer, in sympathy. My brother Jelly gasped.

"That's the worst case of writer's block I've ever heard of," he said.

"I know," said Biro sadly. "If I wasn't a dead poet already I'd think it was terminal."

"You poor man," murmured Wordsword.

"But hey," Biro shrugged, "don't let it spoil your fun. Mr Wordsword, why don't you do one. We'll see whether your poems got any livelier after you died."

"I like to think I've moved with the times," said Wordsword stiffly.

Then he launched himself off Westminster Bridge.

Earth has not anything to show more sad;
dull have we been of soul, passing by
the sight of a world slowly going mad;
this City now doth like a garment wear
the death of the morning, in disrepair,
ships, towers and temples deserted lie

where once were fields and a bright smokeless sky.
Never did sun so wearily set on
rusty dome and ugly theatre,
never did the river glideth so slow
pollution so high and tide so low,
Dear God! the very houses seem to cry
and all that mighty heart must surely die.

"Thank you very much," said Wordsword, as the crowd erupted into literal applause. He held his hands up to fend it off. Collar-itch shook him enthusiastically by one legendary paw, and Jelly by the other.

"No, no, please," Wordsword protested. "It's your turn, Collar-itch."

Collar-itch took the floor. Despite the bitchy things the boys said about him, I thought he still looked good. Definitely the most ethereal of the lot, with a faraway look in his eye and every line on his face etched with mystery.

"Here we go, then," he said.

"I wrote this in black ink on the night sky
With stars to dot the 'i's;
In sap ink on the bark of trees
With ants for full-stops
I wrote this in stretch marks on my mother's stomach - "

"I know that poem. A lunatic told it to me," shouted Biro.

"I know it too. And a lunatic told it to me," shouted Jelly.

They turned to look at each other in amazement.

"Must be the same lunatic!" they shouted together.

"The traveller from an antique land!" continued Jelly. "Thought I'd met him before."

"Do you mind?" said Collar-itch. "I'd like to continue."

"We heard it already," said Biro.

"Preposterous," said Collar-itch. "I spoke this in the silent library."

"We know, we know," sniffed Biro, "Loudly as books shout.
I spoke this in tongues of fire, burning what the poem is about."

"How dare you!" shouted Collar-itch, and snatched the verse back. " I spoke this in the raving tones of a lunatic."

"Gotcha!" Jelly cried. "A lunatic. You said so yourself."

But most of the crowd were congratulating Collar-itch on his recitation. The earlier poetry had warmed the audience up nicely, and his performance had gone down well, despite the heckling of the other romantics. Biro sighed now as the great plagiarist was swept away by the admiration.

"We'll never be able to prove he didn't write it."

"Yes we will," I replied.

"You're very pretty, but quite stupid, Miss Siss," said Biro. "The only person who can prove Collar-itch ripped the poem off is the lunatic, and we'll never be able to find him."

"But he's here," I said.

"What?" spluttered Biro. "How?"

"He came with us," I said. "He's a member of your family. Your other family, I mean: in our proper life-time."

The painful memory slowly dawned on Biro. He'd got so absorbed in playing the Laud, that he'd quite forgotten himself, his other self.

"Cheer up," I said. "You're a bouncing baby."

"Yes," he forced a smile, "and I'll grow to be Laud Bloody Biro, with you for a muse, all over again. But will I remember why?"

"You will," I said, "when you're sitting in history class, in a trance."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Because I'm the teacher," I replied; loving his look as he reappraised his best mate's little sister in the light of this further education.

"So, let's find that lunatic," said Jelly, in a hoarse whisper. "How will we know him?"

"You'll recognise him, Pussy," I said. "He's your uncle."

We split up to search the crowd. It was getting livelier, as everyone learnt that Collar-itch's greatest work had been cut short by their own applause. He still had a final tercet to go. The way people were begging to hear it was obscene.

I saw Biro jumping up and down above their heads, waving at me frantically and mouthing, "Here's uncle Zorba!" I made my way in his direction. Jelly was there too. We all agreed that it was the right lunatic.

What we had to do next was a bit tricky, though: persuade the whole poetry circle to stop revering the grand master and listen to the words of an anonymous nutter. We only managed it thanks to Jelly's raw talent, Biro's supreme self-confidence and my teaching skills. And to the essential nature of the re-union crowd: once a group of seekers after truth and beauty, always a group of seekers after truth and beauty, I suppose. It was a triumph of the wise over the clever.

Collar-itch was barking, that was clear; but the real genius was the unknown madman who was only there for the beer. Truly his voice came from the gutter as he slurred;

This is the whimper
That starts where words fail me
And ends with a bang!

"The lunatic had a speech impediment," says Juno. "His poem was embarrassing to listen to. People started shuffling their feet when he said whimper; and the whole party was breaking up by the time he got to bang. They would have heard those words differently, if spouted by a famous writer."

"But what about the rules?" I shriek. "Did you get a poet to read the instructions for my mating game?"

"Don't be impatient, dear," Juno says, her gold face and silvery hair on full beam again after the gaslight imagery of the reunion.

I'm pleased she had such an entertaining previous life, but I'm dying to reproduce. It's been a long time since Mum had me, and she must have forgotten the intensity of the urge.

"Did you get Collar-itch to read the rules?" I ask her.

"No," she laughs.

"Who then?"

"Not the lunatic?" says Hazel. "Though there's nothing to choose between them. I hope their behaviour won't affect the game."

"I didn't ask either of them," says Juno.

"Biro or Jelly, then?" I sigh. "Though what sort of instructors for a modern girl's mating they'll be, I don't know."

"I didn't ask them either," says Juno.

"Who then?" asks Hazel, as impatient as me now.

"Dorothy Wordsword, of course," says Juno, "the most sensible one of the lot. While the chaps were all congratulating each other on their literary prowess, I took one of their pencils. On a tablecloth, I managed to transcribe the singalo ciphers, in child's handwriting; then I asked Wordsword's sister to read them."

Mum's smile was smug as a folded napkin. "I really don't think a man could have coped with the subtle nuances of those rules."

"Tell me how to do it then," I cry.

"Hold your flying horses," says mum, raising a large golden hand that could almost stop your sun in its tracks. "It's time for church first."

*

Sod church, get shafted, you might be forgiven for thinking. Maybe I'm thinking it too; but it won't get me anywhere. Our days of the week always come, like yours, in exactly the same order, never with Wednesday before Tuesday, or Saturday night after Sunday morning. It is a matter of consensus and coincidence.

And so, even though I'm groaning about going to church, when I want to be moaning as I mate with my sexy singalo, there is no way I could postpone the service. There would simply be no other time to put it.

On top of that, today is a special occasion in our religious calendar. Not a whopper like your Christmas or Easter, but something more modest, like Pentecost; and I've really got to be there.

This is the day that Lee and Sheela conceived their heavenly child. It is the day we celebrate their celestial mating. We sing provocative hymns, say flirtatious prayers and decorate the cathedral in an erotic way. It has always been one of my favourite services, full of the joy of sex; but today, full of dread about my own marriage prospects, I'm worried about getting through it.

Hazel offers to do the music, and Juno's already ironed my cassock and they both promise not to trance too deeply in case I need more back-up. Together, we have no trouble sustaining the erection of my church. They hold the pillars firmly in place, while I engrave them with the icons of our faith, carving a cosmic Karma-Sutra on the stone supports of my temple. Spiralling around each column, I chisel a myth in pornographic pictures. Between breaks in our

concentration we rehearse the hymn.

"Lord of light, Lady of night," I sing.

"You're not projecting," says Hazel, "here, feel this." Holding what you would call my hand against what you would call her heart, she sings; "Lord!" The note vibrates in her chest.

"Lady!" I try.

"Resonate," she says, with my hand on her heart. "Sing from there."

"It gets stuck in my throat," I say.

"Lady of inhalation!" She puts her hand on my chest too. "Lord Exhale..."

We sing the first verse of the hymn, and I start to hum like her, deeper than the lump in my throat. We all have these spiritual blockages, in different places, where the light doesn't quite shine through us. I won't tell you where Hazel's is.

She nods at one of the scenes I've carved, on the pillar she's holding up.

"Seen it?" she says. "Now sing it."

"Great god and goddess, merge energy, mix matter, make friction, get life!" we trill together.

"That's much better," Juno smiles.

"Supreme lord and lady, in graceful fornication; your love is the glue of our world!" we shrill.

After this warm-up I'm in good voice, and gooey by the time my congregation appear. The service starts with a sacrifice, for even perfect love has to hurt a little. Unlike you, we don't offer our gods material objects. We know they have no use for them. Instead each member of the congregation sacrifices something of him or herself. During the first meditation, everyone chooses what to give, or to give up.

I've already decided what to offer. It's a joint sacrifice from me, Mum and Hazel. To commemorate this special day, when two became three; me, my mother and sister will be open to becoming four.

This isn't much of a sacrifice. The next member of our family will come along anyway, whether we willingly give up our threesome or not. But resistance and denial are exactly the sort of things to let go of at a time like this; all over the cathedral people are releasing their grudges, and setting their jealousy free.

As the congregation make their sacrifices, the sound of a hundred petty arguments and childish squabbles rises to the ceiling, where it dissipates like the

pretty clouds we know are only a painted representation of heaven. Then all is calm.

"Now," I say in the silence, "feel it."

There is a beat like a distant drum, but the distance it comes from is within me; a whole interior that the rest of the congregation are experiencing too. The savannah inside us is directly proportional to the outer world's vast plains; and although it is open to personal interpretation, I am sure it's the same distant drumming that we all can hear.

"Feel the rhythm," I start to chant, "in the act of creation. Feel the great god and goddess engaged in cosmic copulation. Feel them shake and shimmy in their sexual divinity!"

I slowly bring us all to a spiritual climax. Although in the wondrous cyclical story of our religion this is a relatively minor festival, it's really the most magical and mysterious event of the lot. Perhaps that's why it's down-played; it raises a difficult question. If the godfather and godmother made the nameless godchild, who made Him and Her?

As the worship reaches a high point and the chanting soars to the very tip of the cathedral's spire, I see a dark shadow lurking by the font. I think it's that blessed singalo girl, again.

"Mum, Hazel, look!" I give an urgent telepathic shout.

Instantly alert, they watch with me as she emerges into the light of the aisle. Today, the stained glass windows cast a semen splash of brightness across my tombstone tiles.

"Is it the same one?" I ask.

"They all look alike to me," says Hazel.

"It's definitely her," Juno retorts silently. "We've seen her close up at the singalo centre."

Aloud, I continue the service as if nothing had happened and soon get lost again in its orgasmic ritual. But out of a half-open eye I watch Eulalie's progress up the aisle.

It takes her an age to reach the third pair of pillars, and by then I know she's never going to walk it on her own. I start to pull, but it makes no difference to her pace.

"Help," I whisper to Juno and Hazel.

We all pull together, and suddenly it seems the singalo's load is lighter, her limbs more likely to obey. She comes slightly faster up the aisle, rising onto two feet, making it as far as the fourth and fifth columns.

Then she slows down.

"Pull harder," I say to my mum and sister. But it's a bizarre tug of war where one side pulls and the other pushes.

I can see the girl mouthing at me desperately.

"I've got something to tell you," I think she says.

"Can't it wait till we're at the singalo centre?" I call back. It seems ridiculous, her having to squeeze herself painfully into my sacred space, when she could shortly be telling me in the comfort of her own territory.

She shakes her head.

"I have to tell you here," she screams banshee-like as she starts to slide backwards down my aisle.

"Do you know what I'm thinking?" says Juno. "She's the singalo everybody's been talking about, the one who's going around whispering the name of the third god."

"Hey," I say, "you could be right."

"Really?" asks Hazel.

"Well, she first appeared in a premonition, and said she was spreading the word," I reply. "We saw her whisper in Dot's ear and now Dot doesn't spin anymore."

"And we saw her whisper to Surely, and now her eczema's cleared up," says Juno.

Hazel watches the singalo girl clawing at smooth flooring, trying to get a grip on the worn stone slabs that pave the church aisle. As if it were a moving walkway, Eulalie starts going backwards the moment she stops running. She has to run to stay on the spot but the conveyor belt goes faster, and makes her a martyr, dragged away down the aisle.

"She certainly seems very religious," says Hazel, "but how can she know the name of the third god?"

I've not even pretending to chant the cliturgy as this conversation swells in my head, but the rest of the congregation are now sufficiently carried away to finish by themselves. The service comes to a very satisfactory climax with the

final verse of the mammoth hymn:

"Lord of light, Lady of night; thy moaning will make a new morning!"

Eulalie is back at the font, exhausted. She sinks her head into the holy water, in a gesture of defeat; but seconds later she pulls it out again and tosses her long hair backwards in a defiant move, which sends an arc of water in a graceful cascade over the congregation.

Even though water can't touch us in the same way it splashes singalos, this makes a special effect, a rainbow of wet reds in the light from the rose window, a lovely finish to the ceremony.

"Well, now we've met the pink pantheon," I laugh.

*

I get rid of the church congregation so quickly that she will hardly be back at the Singalo Centre before us. Everyone is feeling full of reproductive energy and raring to go. I debrief my flock quickly in the up-lit stone porch of the church, and take off at speed.

"Now, tell me the rules to the mating game, Mum," I say, my eyes shut tightly as we fly.

"They're very complicated," says Juno. "I'm not sure where to start. You play the cups and he plays the balls."

"Do they have those dotty singalo things," Hazel asks her; "dice?"

"No," says Juno. "Not exactly."

"How do we score, then?" I ask. "How do we move from square to square?"

"Why not wait till we get there," she says, "and take each move as it comes."

The thought of going blind to my date, with only my mother's voice as a guide, is scary. I'm starting to panic as we alight on the pavement outside the singalo centre. As ever, neon green announces the distress within, the flickering sign in a literal language. But today there is ambient music coming from inside; the sound of wind chiming in the deep forest, and an Aeolian harp instead of the usual wailing.

The family of social workers come to let us in, letting out the incense smell of jasmine, musk and myrrh, instead of the usual whiff of embarrassment and confusion that seems to cling to distressed singalos.

Surely Valiumtime approaches us, smiling. We see her every time we come, but there's something different about her today.

"Hey, you're not knitting," says Hazel.

That's it! She's normally attached to a massive pair of knitting needles that never stop moving, and endless tangles of wool.

"I've finished it," the middle-aged singalo shouts for joy, opening her arms wide to show a jumper in a hundred different colours and stitches, full of knots and stops and starting again; a patchwork of mistakes but a work of pride. "If I can knit this," says Surely, "you can do blue."

The family of social workers quickly turn the talk from the delicate colour.

"Haven't you mated yet, Angela?" they tut.

"Give her a chance," laughs Juno. "It's a difficult business."

"She's got to play a board game," says Hazel, "and we've only just read the rules."

"Tricky," the family of social workers sucks its teeth.

"Every time we're in his company our minds go blank," Hazel adds.

"We can't even find our way to his room," Juno agrees.

"Let's get someone to show you," the Head says.

"Me, moi, ich, io!" Surely is so keen to speak, now, she's self-translating.

Her jumper catches on a nail as she leaves the day room, but she doesn't notice, leading us down the corridor with a chant.

"I know who you're going to see," she intones gleefully. "I know what you're going to do."

In her footsteps, which were recently a nervously shuffle, but are now a regal gait, we follow around a bend; and I try to point out that her jumper is unravelling but can't get a word in for the yarn she is spinning.

"I've only just learned to talk," says Surely, "but I'll tell you the oldest story in the book. The Marriage of Art and Science."

We follow the long thread of her story down the corridors of the residential home. It tells us what we already know; that Singalo into Proper Person doesn't

go. But Surely chants it so profoundly it's as if her words could change the plot. Each pause is a knot in the wool. Each line is a step in her dance, as she sings;

There was to be a contest, Science versus Art,
to see which one was cleverest, which one was not so smart;
who had more beauty in her soul, or more truth in his heart
and which one played, on a global stage, the most important part.

The first task was the fastest; they had a race to run.
Science had almost finished before Art heard the starting gun;
he ran in a straight line, she hopped and skipped and spun.
I'm more aerodynamic, he said, that is why I won.

The second test was hardest; when she heard the news
that they'd be doing maths next Art cried and asked her Muse
to help her solve the problem of the hypotenuse.
I don't do numbers, it replied, that is why you'll lose.

The next job was to write an ode to the bees and birds.
Science took out his microscope but all that he inferred
were plain facts; how I wish I had your pretty way with words,
he said to Art, who wished she'd known his type were not all nerds."

Hazel giggles. I know she secretly thinks my man is a bit of a ninny. Her fantasy mate would be much more...well, let's just say he'd have no bones and still be harder than my singalo guy. He'd be almost transparent and still have more form than old green eyes.

As Surely sings on, and brings on the fateful date, the next verse agrees that me and my partner seem to be chalk and cheese. Following on down the corridor to his room, I twang the one string of her unknitting jumper in a doleful accompaniment. Juno links arms with Hazel and marches her gaily behind.

When the umpire pointed to the mountain they must climb,
Art's imagination got them up there in no time;

Science's apparatus told them it was made of limestone.
He gave her the reason and she gave him the rhyme.

Then there was a wrestling match and when the referee
saw they were enjoying it he made his last decree:
keep up the Ju-Jitsu you two, fight but as one team,
add those two half-nelsons up for total victory.

There was to be a wedding, Science marries Art,
together they are cleverer and shouldn't be apart;
two hemispheres of one great mind, two chambers of one heart,
two feathered wings for high flying; bulls-eye for Cupid's dart!

Surely dances to a stop in front of a bedroom door. She has sung me
into believing that I will actually be able to mate with a man of the opposite
species. She claps her hands in delight, then opening her arms to usher us
towards the door of our conquest, the singalo realises that she's naked. The
jumper has come completely undone; she's swapped her knitting for the gift of
speech. With a philosophical shrug, the changed woman begins to dance back
down the corridor, winding the wool onto her hands as she goes.

Not a bad fertility ritual for a spinster, but now that she's gone I feel scared.
I lean against Mum, all of a flutter, but she urges me to be firm.

"We must be as sharp as arrows to enter the world of the singalo male,"
she says.

His door looks different every time I see it. Last time it was all swirling
pinks and purples, but today it is red and black and white, with numbers visible in
brief flashes. If you looked at it long enough you would start to see a roulette
wheel or spinning dartboard. I aim myself at the bulls-eye, dead centre.

I miss, and so do Juno and Hazel; all three of us avoid the target
completely. Staggering upright again, we still just manage the Charlie's Angels
pose; stiffer, straighter, with shinier hair.

Then, remembering the lesson from last time, I go limp and Juno and
Hazel copy me. Like a handful of helpless maidens, we swoon on my singalo's

doorstep. Quick as a dropped hanky, we're snatched up and sucked into the room.

I'm so pleased with myself for remembering the way in that I forget the singalo is verbally challenged, and wait ages for his opening gambit. He's looking particularly handsome, though, his green eyes illuminating the room so brightly, I have to lower mine for shade. Eventually I look up again and say, "So, you still can't speak first, then?"

"No," he says.

"Better now?" I ask.

"Yes, much," he says.

"How have you been?" I ask.

"Fine thanks," he says, "You?"

"Fine," I reply. "We've read the rules."

"Good," he says. "Did you understand them?"

I don't quite know how to answer this. My mother understands the rules, at least she understands the language they're in, but she can't convey their exact meaning to me.

"Sort of," I reply.

"If you play your hunches it helps your chances," he says.

"That's useful to know," says Juno.

The singalo's eyes flicker at her telepathic voice in my head, but he can't possibly hear it. The communication between us is really stilted.

"Any preliminaries, before we start?" I ask him.

"I don't think so," my mate replies. "Just got to turn it on."

With the flick of a singalo switch he brings the game back to life, from a neon seed into the glowing trunk into the spreading branches of a chestnut tree table-top on which the sexual chess board is laid.

"But I don't even know your name," I say.

"Oh, sorry. It's Sighman," he says.

"Sighman," I repeat. The word in my mouth is too rich, accompanied by his full gaze. I fix my eyes on the twelve cups and twelve balls lined up waiting to meet each other on the black and white singalo squares.

"Let's get on with it," he says.

"That doesn't sound very romantic," I murmur.

"Don't worry," he replies. "It'll get better."

It does. We start getting on with it, and end up getting it on. I've never seen the point of singalo games, but today I discover the proper way to play. The first rule I learn is what not to do. At the start it seems each thing I try, my mother's voice in my head says, "you can't do that". I pick up a cup, she tells me to put it down, I move it to another square, she tells me to put it back.

"Tell me what I **can** do," I beg, silently.

"Watch him," she replies.

The singalo is staring intently at his balls.

"Why is he doing that?" I ask Mum.

"He is giving them names," she says.

Hazel gives a burst of nervous laughter, in the background.

"Why?" she says.

"Because that," shrugs Juno, "is how to play the game."

"Do I have to do it too?" I ask, beginning to click.

"Yes," says Juno, "you have to give each of your cups a name."

"Ooh, what shall I call them?" I giggle.

"The names are already decided," Mum says. "You just have to choose which is which, out of a list of twelve." She has memorised them and now gives an angelic recitation but they are the strangest names I've ever heard:

Thunder in the Afternoon, Eagle Soaring, Favourite Bedtime Drink; they seem to be part race-horse, part Native American, part tacky TV quiz show. Dance with a Stranger, Red Face Laughing, Sunny Riverbank, Tickle Fight; the list goes on and on.

"Persistent Ringing, Dab Hand with a Spanner, Death," says Juno, "and No Underwear. The last one is Birth of a Baby. I hope it's the last one, anyway."

I just dish out their names in the order they came, because at this point, I can't see what there is to gain by agonising over which identical cup should be given which meaningless title.

"Now what?" I ask Juno, telepathically.

"Ask him," she says. "He's waiting."

"Oh," I say aloud, "sorry."

From across the green laser-beamed table, Sighman is gazing at me.

"Are you ready for the naming ceremony?" he asks.

"Since the moment I was born," I reply slickly.

Like a showbiz magician, he reveals to me an extra ball in his hand, a thirteenth ball, not intense matt black like the other twelve, but a frivolous glittering silver. He throws it, like a thunderclap, onto the board where it smashes with a flash of light, and an iridescent liquid spills across the chequered squares.

"The vapours," says the singalo, as it dries, "are a memory-enhancing drug; but I don't know if it'll work on you."

"I've got a pretty good memory," I reply.

"We'll see," he says. "Here are the names of my balls." He touches each one with the tip of his finger as he speaks: "Holiday to Venice, Grey Feather, Jealous Rage."

"Help! Learn them too!" I give my mother and sister a telepathic shriek.

"Doing it already," they reply coolly.

"Hot Chocolate, Hill Walking, Present Throughout," the singalo continues; "Car Breakdown, Ansaphone Message, Crystal Stream. Christmas Party, Fancy Restaurant, Pollen-stain on a Dark Suit."

"Pollen-stain on a Dark Suit," I repeat with more confidence than I feel. "Okay, got that."

"Now it's your turn," says my partner.

One by one I tell him the names of my cups, concerned only with the appearance of my insubstantial finger as it points them out. Compared to his it is completely see-through, giving nothing but the illusion of touch. I'm so worried that this will handicap my game, I'm sure I give him the names in a different order to the way I allocated them before; but the last one I point at is Birth of a Baby.

"Then we are ready to begin," says Sighman, when I've finished speaking.

"You go first," I say.

He must make the first move because I don't know what to do. After a few goes I'm still stumped. All my concentration is taken up with the task of moving my pieces by telekinesis, while making it look like my transparent excuse for a finger is doing the work; so I haven't even begun to master the complicated counting system by which one of my cups and one of his balls eventually meet on the same square.

"Christmas Party and Dance with a Stranger," I whisper to my mum and sister. "That seems to make sense." Clumsily I fumble with the cup and ball. "Why won't they go together?"

"Many combinations may seem to make sense," Juno sounds as if she is actually quoting from the rulebook for once, "but you will instantly know if a pairing is correct."

"So no matter how hard she tries to squeeze, Christmas Party won't fit into Dance with a Stranger," says Hazel. "You might as well put the pieces down, Angela."

My imaginary fingers need fiddle with the singalo's gizmos no longer. It's a relief to find that there's virtually no physical effort required for the game, and I drop the cup and ball back onto their white square.

Sighman takes the ball called Christmas Party and moves it five places to where it joins one of my cups on a black square. It's Red Face Laughing.

As soon as the pieces touch there's a loud bang and in a flash the singalo and I are transported to a completely different scene. Gone is his dim bedroom: we are in a tinsel-beamed hall full of people dancing in bright paper hats.

I blink, and his bedroom is back. It all happens so quickly, I gasp and try to grasp the details before they fade away; but all I can remember is trembling baubles and winking lights and his red face laughing.

Red Face Laughing! I look at my cup on the black square with his ball and give a shout of amazement. Christmas Party is nestling inside it, with a fit so snug, the pair are now inseparable.

I look closer.

"That's amazing," I say to Juno and Hazel. "How did he do it?" I touch the pieces with my inadequate fingers, and tug them with the power of my mind. There is no way they can be pulled apart.

"It's your go, I think," says Juno. "Play another cup."

I move one at random. Across the board, Sighman responds. I mirror his action with another cup. He shrugs, and moves a different ball, three squares closer to it. I move another cup, two steps up behind it. He shimmies one square closer. I move two again.

I've finally worked out the counting. He moves three squares, I move four, he moves five squares, I move six; every seven goes one of us gets to zero, miss

a turn. It's not as random as dice throwing, but I'm still moving my cups around the board in an arbitrary way.

Sighman gives me a cross look.

"What's up?" I say.

"You're not concentrating," he replies.

"Remember the names of the pieces," whispers Juno. "They unlock a story."

"Yes, but it's all in weird terminology," I whine. "Car Breakdown and Ansaphone Message, what do they mean when they're at home?" I pout at the balls closest to my cluster of cups.

"Never heard of them," says Juno. "Look at your cup's names to see if any bells are..."

"Persistent Ringing! That sounds like a singalo thing," I say. "The kind of technology that may break down or speak up."

"Try it," says Juno.

On my next go I am able to move Persistent Ringing to Ansaphone Message.

As soon as the cup touches down on the square, I feel myself pulled roughly into the blackness, and violently thrown out again into another day.

I'm dialling his phone number with a love-struck finger, over and over again, though I know he's not at home. I just love to listen to his voice on the answering machine, so excited by the polite message, that I hold my breath in case my heavy breathing is recorded. I take in every word, feeding my crush with fantasies of how his impersonal tone will change for me, when we eventually get through to each other.

I blink at the dirty mouthpiece, and it disappears. The game resumes, but I'm more and more confused. How could I have imagined that scene? I didn't even know what a telephone was until now.

The singalo smiles at me, and moves one of his balls three squares. It's Car Breakdown.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I groan silently. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

"No Underwear?" whispers Hazel. "Is that anything to do with Car Breakdowns, Mum?"

"I don't think so," Juno replies. "Dorothy Wordsword got a bit tight-lipped at that point, actually; just muttered about 'adjusting her suspension belt'."

"How about Dab Hand with a Spanner?" I ask her.

"Dorothy thought that might be some kind of tool," she says.

"Let's see if it will do the job, then," I chirp, moving my cup towards the ball.

Mr Singalo sees it coming, and by the look on his face, I've made a good choice. He moves his ball closer to my cup. On my next go, I jump four squares and join him on a black one; but nothing happens.

"What's going on?" I say, "I thought that was going to work?" But Sighman doesn't look perturbed, he simply moves his ball three places to a white square.

"Oh yes," remembers Juno suddenly. "Another rule. Some pairs connect on black squares and some on white. It's something to do with active and passive roles, apparently; who takes the lead on that occasion."

"Okay," I murmur, following his Car Breakdown. We have to manoeuvre around each other a bit, before the numbers let us come together on a white square; but the minute we get there, there's a blinding flash of light.

"Damn it!" I shout. "My car's broken down!"

"Don't worry," he replies calmly, "I'm a dab hand with a spanner."

The next thing I know, he's under my bonnet, stripped to the waist; and I'm watching from the kitchen window, as a trickle of sweat runs slick as engine oil down his spine, and disappears beneath his taut leather belt.

I blink, and am brought abruptly back to the game.

"Did you see that?" I ask Juno and Hazel. "Are you getting the pictures too?"

"I don't think they're just pictures," says Juno. "Quick, look, he's on the move again."

"Hill Walking?" says Hazel.

"It's going in a specific direction," says Mum. "The only cups he could be interested in are Eagle Soaring or Thunder in the Afternoon."

"I think Eagle Soaring matches his Grey Feather," I say, "and that's right over the other side of the board. It must be my Thunder in the Afternoon he wants."

I give chase with this cup, and soon corner him on a black square, but nothing happens. Unflustered, Hill Walking makes for Eagle Soaring. They catch each other on a white square.

There is a blinding light. I realise I'm looking directly at the sun.

"To the left, to the left," Sighman says.

"I can't see anything now," I squint at him.

All around us, rolling hills, undulating like a comfortable blanket. In the distance, villages nestle in its crevices, with tiny church spires; closer up, rocky outcrops pierce the soft green cloth in places where the hill is becoming a mountain.

The singalo and I are holding hands, but I swear I've never felt such a sense of freedom. We're standing insignificant on the altar of nature, tiny parts of its beauty, perfect so long as we don't make ugly faces, squinting at the sun.

He points at the eagle soaring.

"There," he says.

I follow the uplift of his arm, the uprush of the eagle's energy, as it arches over the sky. Then I blink.

"Oh," says Hazel. "I was enjoying that."

"Me too," I say disappointedly, back in the game. "Every time I close my eyes, it switches the vision off."

"Try to last longer next go," my sister replies. "This is fun."

It's my turn. I scrutinise the cups.

"I don't like the look of Death much," I say.

"Well, leave it alone then," says Juno. "It might not be as bad as it seems."

"Which one goes with his Grey Feather, if it's not Eagle Soaring?" I wonder.

"What do you know about tickling?" Mum asks slowly.

"Not much," I reply. "I know you need a sense of touch."

"Try Tickle Fight," she says. "But be careful."

The split second my cup touches his ball on a black square I scream. A thread of terror seems to draw me into this scene, but as soon as I see what's going on I laugh.

We've returned from our hill walking expedition to a cosy little cottage with a patchwork quilt on the bed. We've prized off our walking boots and soaked our

feet in a bowl of hot water. And then he's come at me with a feather we found, pretending to stroke my blisters and bumps, but quickly turning callous and making me giggle and kick.

It's impossible not to blink when you're being tickled, so the scene is over very quickly. The ball and the cup are conjoined. I shiver.

"I really felt that," I say. "How can it be my imagination?"

"Don't question it, just keep playing," says Juno. "You're nearly half-way there."

"What shall I do next?"

"Move the one closest to you," she advises.

"Favourite Bedtime Drink," I say. "That's got to be Hot Chocolate." I'm really getting the hang of this.

I move it five places. He moves Hot Chocolate four; my hunch is correct. We circle around each other briefly, with a three and a two; then he jumps right into my Favourite Bedtime Drink, on one.

The black square gives way with a splash to a mug of almost intoxicating hot liquid.

"Mmmm, lovely," I say, "thanks."

The steam gets into my eyes, but I remember not to blink.

I'm in the bed with the patchwork quilt. He's getting in beside me. I remember not to blink.

"This is my favourite bedtime drink," I say.

"I know," he replies.

"It's been such a nice day."

"The best, ever."

"What shall we do tomorrow?" I ask.

"There's a whole night to come first," he says.

I forget not to blink, and get torn away from the scene like a page of bedtime reading.

"Shit!" I say. "I didn't want to do that."

"In the next scene, try and find some matchsticks to keep your eyes open," says Hazel.

"How come you never blink first?" I ask Sighman.

"Practise," he says.

"Do you play this game with other women?" I ask rather aggressively.

"No," he laughs, "but I've been in training."

"What, you've trained yourself not to blink?"

"Yes," he says, a bit embarrassed.

"And you've never played this game with anyone else," I say, my anger melting away.

"Of course not," he replies. "Not this game exactly."

"Whose go is it?" I ask him.

"Yours."

Exactly half way through. Six cups and balls have paired up, six of each still await the other to make it complete.

I decide to play a cup that has kept catching my eye. No Underwear, it's called. Intriguing.

"Mum, what **is** underwear?" I ask her.

"I haven't a clue," shrugs Juno. "Except that Dorothy Wordsword seemed reluctant to say it."

"You should have asked Laud Biro," says Hazel. "He would have known about it, if it were anything naughty."

"I'm going to make an instinctive move," I say, scanning the board, "towards the Dark Suit."

"Dark Suit?" asks Juno.

"There, look," I nod at one of the singalo's balls. "Pollen-stain on a Dark Suit. To me that reeks of No Underwear."

I put my finger on the cup and tentatively move it two squares. Sighman's eyes light up. I always thought that singalo games meant keeping a poker-straight face, but this is different. It's finally dawning on me that we are playing this together, both on the same side, not in competition with each other.

But it is not his Pollen-Stain on a Dark Suit that responds to my proposal. It is Fancy Restaurant. The ball bounces three squares towards my cup, waits while I wander four squares in its general direction, then reaches me in five paces; plopping into place on the white square, as our plates of food are put down on the pristine tablecloth.

Eyes wide. No blinking.

Eyes wide, I look up at Sighman. "I'm not wearing any underwear," I say.

Eyes wide, I survey the scene, from the wallpaper to the waiters, and Sighman again, who is choking on his first mouthful.

I wonder if I'm going to be able to eat any of this delicious food. Eyes wide, I lift a forkful of it to my mouth.

"I love you," splutters the singalo.

I blink before I even have a chance to taste the food. I look at him, across the table with the game on it now; the same him, but different, like me. No waiters, no wallpaper. No underwear.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I keep blinking and spoiling it."

"That's alright," he replies.

"But it was really romantic," I sigh. "We could have spent the whole evening there if I hadn't blinked."

"And it would have been the most thrilling sexual encounter of our relationship," he says.

"Well," I say, "it's not particularly polite to talk like that. Shall I play on?"

"It would be rude not to," he replies.

I move a piece without really thinking, then see him frown. It's Dance With a Stranger. I watch which ball he starts rolling in response. It's Jealous Rage. We hold eye-contact for a moment, and there is something hostile in the play as I move again and he responds.

Dance with a Stranger confronts Jealous Rage on a white square. Nothing happens. He moves away, daringly holding my stare; I follow, but cannot accost him on a black square because of the tricks that the numbers are playing.

I have to chase him halfway around the board before I slam my cup onto his ball, pinning it to the black square. Then with equal force, everything is falling away from me and I am tumbling down a dark tunnel; which ends with me stumbling against a wall, behind a small palm tree in a dark night-club.

"Hey, green!" I say. "Look, they've got green here!"

In my left ear, I hear Mum and Hazel say, "just remember not to blink," but out of my right ear I hear the couple standing next to me say "she's had one too many to drink".

I try not to blink, but it's hard because I'm crying. My lovely boyfriend is dancing with a stranger. She stole him while my back was turned, and took him

onto the dance floor where the mirror ball is turning, and he hasn't revolved back to me yet.

I try not to blink, but it's hard because I'm lip-reading the conversation, as they dance around in circles, and may be missing crucial bits.

"Why don't you dance with somebody else?" whispers Hazel.

"The gods have spoken. I must mate with that man," I say. The couple standing next to me move further away.

The slut he's dancing with leans closer to Sighman till her skin-tight purple satin bodysuit is leering at the seams. That does it. With a rustling of faux foliage I rush from my hiding place shouting; "Get off, he's mine!"

Then I blink.

"What is going on here?" I shout.

"Calm down," says Juno telepathically. "You're back."

"What is going on there?" I say. "Where is that place? Can you see it too? There is green. A pot plant."

"It wasn't real," says Hazel, "it was plastic."

"But there was purple too," I reply, "a tart in plum, simultaneously. How do they do so much colour at once?"

"Angela," says mum, "the Lucky Man is waiting."

I'd forgotten we'd paused on the brink of a violent quarrel, arrested by my blink. I look up at Sighman. He is still staring at the board, where Dance with a Stranger and Jealous Rage are newly melded, the ball stubborn in the cup.

When he looks up at me, there is still something of an argument in his eyes. He challenges me to speak.

"I was wrong then, was I?" I ask him.

"Oh, very wrong," he says.

"Well, it looked very suspicious," I say.

"Anything looks suspicious," he replies, "through the leaves of fake palm tree. You don't trust me."

"It's the Urge to Reproduce," I plead. It brings out my possessive streak. "The sight of your sexual organs so close to that woman's made me pounce."

"Don't worry," Sighman says; "You and I are reproducing already. Here comes my next ball."

It's Holiday to Venice. That sounds promising. He moves it two squares, not far enough to tell me which of my cups he's aiming for.

I look at the pieces I've got left. Death: brings me out in a cold sweat. Sunny River Bank: does Venice have something to do with water? I move this cup three squares.

He moves Holiday to Venice four squares, and his destination is still rather vague. He hasn't exactly leapt to intercept Sunny River Bank, but he doesn't seem to be courting Death, either.

I go five places and try for some affirming eye-contact with him, but he avoids my gaze and side-steps my Sunny River Bank. He's heading for Thunder in the Afternoon. I move it to meet him. Now he looks up at me, and smiles.

Holiday in Venice meets my cup on a black square. Nothing happens. I slide, provocatively I hope, to a white square nearby. He joins me there shortly.

This time, instead of a flash of light, it is a crashing sound that takes me there. As the ball enters the cup on the white square, I am transported somehow, to a white room with wide open windows, and long gauzy curtains blowing in a thunderous breeze.

It is a hot, rumbling afternoon, and the sky is aching to rain. By evening it will be clear again for a glorious sunset over the spires and waterways. We are on holiday in Venice, in bed.

We've been in bed all day, and the white sheets are rucked like the wind-blown curtains. I can feel the thundery air drying the dampness of my body, crackle-glazed with spent desire.

I blink.

"Damn it!" I say. "Such tantalising glimpses!"

"Don't worry," he says, "you're doing really well."

"Don't patronise me," I yell. "I haven't the faintest idea what's going on. But if you always already know which ball goes in which cup, what is the point of this game?"

"We're mating," he says.

He's right. I'm so bogged down in theoretical details I've forgotten the higher purpose of our play.

"How can it be so real?" I say to my mother and my sister. "That was CO2 I was breathing, genuine afternoon air; there were chemical combinations for

everything. H₂O tapped on the window panes, and trudged past our balcony, polluted with CH₄. That was a physical body, in a concrete bed, in a real hotel room, in Venice."

"And where is Venice, when it's at home?" asks Hazel.

"It doesn't matter," says Juno. "Sighman is right; you're meant to be making love. Just relax and enjoy it, or go at it hammer and tongs, or use it for spiritual enlightenment, whichever turns you on. Just do it, and save the analysis for afterwards."

"Okay then," I say. "Stand by me if there's trouble."

"For better, for worse," the singalo murmurs.

"What?" I say, looking up at him sharply.

He shakes his head.

"You spoke," I said, "without me speaking first. Not out loud at least," I add, telepathically.

"It's your turn," he says, then when I continue to stare at him quizzically, "it's your move."

I have three cups left to play. Sunny River Bank, Birth of a Baby, and Death. I hope they don't come in that order. I'd prefer if it death doesn't come anywhere; but I presume that if Death comes before Birth of a Baby, then it can't be the baby who dies.

So I bravely play the Death cup first. Sighman grins, and moves the ball called Pollen-Stain on a Dark Suit.

They meet on a black square, and I am enveloped in blackness. For a moment I cannot breathe, as if I have been buried alive, but then I realise that it is just my head buried in the singalo's shoulder.

He is wearing a dark suit, and as I draw back from it slightly I see the pollen stain on the lapel, from the lilies we brought to the funeral. His arm is around me supportively; we have lost a mutual friend. Standing close enough to be united in grief, I can smell the white lilies on his black jacket.

I blink.

"Blimey," Hazel mutters in the background, "she's crying."

"Angela," says Juno, "don't take it so hard. It's just a mating game."

"You don't understand," I sniff. "We were really there; and in that place, when someone dies, it seems as if they are gone for ever."

"But darling," Mum says, "don't forget, the birth of a baby could be just around the next corner."

That cheers me up a bit. I raise my gaze to the green-eyed man.

"I'd better get pregnant after all this," I say.

"Fertilising you as we speak," he replies.

"Whose funeral was it?" I ask.

"My best man. He secretly fancied you."

"But how can we have a friend like that," I say, "when we hardly know each other? And how can I be so sad, just because he's died? The smell of a flower made me feel that something sweet was out of reach for ever. Is it really me?"

"Virtually," he replies.

"What do you mean?" I demand.

"It would take a very long time to explain," he says, "and your eggs are getting cold."

There are only two cups left to play. I move my Sunny River Bank towards his Crystal Stream, confidently. He draws closer, the ball rolling unerringly. Now we have only two more meetings to go, I'm determined to make the most of our mating, no matter how little I understand it.

As soon as the numbers allow it, his Crystal Stream touches my Sunny River Bank, on a white square. It's hard not to blink in a black out, but it's a bit easier when everything is white. I wait patiently, eyes open, for the moment's blindness to give way to shapes and colours. As the picture appears, I am lying on my back, with Sighman stretched out beside me, very relaxed.

We are not saying a word, but I don't feel the need to break the silence first and make conversation. There is communication between us; I am being slowly eroded by him, like the babbling stream carves meaning into the rock-faced landscape.

When the scene crystallises, we are lying on a sunny river bank, framed by plane trees. There's that green again, but not the green of Singalo City or Proper People's dreams: it is subject to light from other sources, not lit from within like our colour. It is a green you can only see in the sunlight, or by electric light: not a shade with a life of its own, not a presence like my sister's viridescence.

Nevertheless it is nice and peaceful on the riverbank with the stream flowing by. We are just resting there, feeling the solidity of the earth and the fluidity of the water as if they were symbols of our relationship.

I blink.

The landscape fades, but the peaceful feeling stays with me. Sunny River Bank and Crystal Stream are locked together, as if they had never existed apart. There are only two pieces left to play. My cup is called Birth of a Baby, and his ball is Present Throughout.

There is an expectant hush in the singalo's bedroom; and even in my head, Juno and Hazel are quiet. I have moved to a position beyond their help; I can still sense their support, but delivering a baby is one of those things a girl has to do alone.

But Sighman is going to be present throughout. Tentatively I move my cup one place towards his ball. He moves two towards me, I move three. He moves four places, I move five. We're side by side, me on a black square, him on a white. Although we're not telepathic I can tell he's wondering which square our pieces will work together on. Six; for the richer times. Five; for the poorer times. Four; for the sickness. Three; for the health. He moves two places to another white. I move one and land on top of him.

His ball is sucked inside my cup. Its curves are pressing; I am about to give birth. Before I played this game I'd never felt pain. I'd never dialled a telephone number, handed someone a spanner, or felt warm air blowing over the surface of my body. I'd never really seen green, or truly believed a friend had died. All these new experiences I have taken in my stride but the pain of childbirth has me lying on my back with my legs apart as if I'm being ripped in half.

I could blink, but I'd miss it. I decide to stand it for as long as I can; I'm already feeling the urge to push.

"Don't push yet," says Sighman.

Other people are telling me not to push yet, also visible between the V-shape of my legs. I reply in language that needs no translation. Wordless in any tongue I try to convey the pain I've already forgotten in the time-lapse of telling it. Pain too present-tense for the memory to bear; a moment by moment agony that has already merged into one, the moment before the baby was born.

"Now you can push," says the midwife, from between my legs.

Now the tectonic plates of my inner planet can shift, prized apart by a reinforced bootie. Now I can squeeze the world from its orbit, with the strength of my pelvic floor muscles. A few small bones in the singalo's hand get broken.

The midwife looks up from the deep v and starts to laugh at him.

"If you think that hurts," she says.

Sighman wipes my forehead with a wet flannel, then wraps it round his hand, and goes to look down.

"Stay here," I shout, grabbing his arm, and pulling his face close to my own sweaty, contorted features. "Stay up this end. Don't watch the head coming out."

"Why not?" he pants.

"Psychologists say that if you see the head coming out," I scream, "you'll never fancy me again."

He blinks.

"You bastard," I cry, abruptly back in his singalo bedroom. "I wanted to finish that."

"It is finished," he says.

"But I wanted to see the baby."

"You would have blinked."

"I might not have done," I shout. "I was getting better."

"I know, I'm sorry," he says. "I was just surprised to hear you talking about sex at a time like that. Normally, you don't think it's particularly polite to."

We stare at each other across the table, across the board on which twelve cups and twelve balls have mated. There is a pause.

"What will happen to the pieces now?" I say. "Do they come apart again?"

"No," he laughs.

"What are they made of?" I ask him.

"Well, some are made of sugar and spice," he says, "and others are made of slugs and snails." He starts to pick the pieces off the board in their sticky pairs.

"What are you doing?"

"Throwing them away."

"Where?" I ask him.

"The bin." He tips them in.

Surely that can't be the end. I gaze after the cup-and-ball stories and see them falling in formation; first like an arrowhead, then in a heart shape, then streaking

into single file to fall like a meteorite until they are out of sight, leaving trails of smoke, faintly pink and blue, in the bin's interior. And they keep falling, for there never comes the sound of them hitting the bottom.

"What's down there?" I ask, in hushed tones. I haven't seen a bin before; in the real world, nothing is rubbish.

"Where do they go?" I say.

Sighman doesn't speak.

"And this is going to get me pregnant?" I snort.

His face breaks into a smile, but he still doesn't reply.

"What's the matter with you? Can't you understand me?" I say.

He bursts out laughing. Juno and Hazel cackle into life, cheering on either side of my head.

"We can't understand a word you're saying," they chuckle. "It's worked. You're pregnant!"

*

Proper people, with no monthly cycles, can't wait to take a pregnancy test; we have to know instantly if the mating worked. No pink dot, no blue line, no accuracy on the day your period is due. We know instantly that it's positive, and the signs are unmissable. We talk differently. We suddenly start to speak in strange ways, with crossword clues on our lips; such cryptic linguistics that must be inspired by the muse of maternity herself.

For example, as soon as we leave the singalo centre, we fly into the Kennedys who thrust Madge forward excitedly.

"Hey," they say, "listen to this!"

"Proper pals," says Madge, opening her arms to us, "please permit personal pleasure."

We hug her delightedly. She has given us confirmation of her pregnancy. It's a common one, we've heard it often. Many women in her condition start every word of a sentence with the same letter. It could be any letter, but P and M seem to recur most frequently.

"Goodness," says Hazel, hugging her warmly, "I bet that's hard work."

"Phew!" nods Madge. "Perspiring profusely!"

"How about you, Angela?" asks Mavis Kennedy. "Pregnant yet?"

"I don't feel any different," I say, "though I have recently mated."

Everyone roars with laughter.

"What's so funny?" I say. I'm not alliterating. Every word starts with a different letter, but they still laugh.

"I'm not pregnant," I say.

"Oh Angela," my sister is clutching her sides, "can't you hear yourself?"

"I sound perfectly normal," I say, but I'm speaking with a regional accent. It's going to be hard to translate, because what you think is a regional accent depends where you live.

So, if you live in the south of England imagine I live up north; but if you live in the north of Italy imagine I live down south. If you live in Paris, imagine I live in Brittany; but if you live in New York, imagine I live in London. If you live in the East End, imagine I live in the West End; if you live in the city, imagine that I live in the country; but if you live in poverty, imagine that I sound posh. Wherever you live, you could think I sound Scottish.

"And I'm going to speak like this for the whole pregnancy?"

"Don't worry," says Hazel telepathically, "your inner voice isn't affected."

"No?" I think. "Oh, thank gods!"

"Steady on," Juno winces at my psychic volume.

"I'm not going to utter another word aloud for the rest of my confinement," I say inside.

Even though I'm pregnant, we still have to go to work. The endless round of school, church, and singalo centre continues but, as if in empathy with my unborn child, I am silent, leading an internalised existence.

In the classroom, I fall into a faultless trance. Now that I have safely, mated Juno can continue with the curriculum naturally, unaffected by issues of singalo history, or questions of deviant sexual couplings. She no longer has to probe the past-lives of her tiny pupils, or ask enormous favours of their previous incarnations.

I sit in quiet satisfaction, hands clasped across my stomach, as she teaches the first law of physics: just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there.

My silent serenity is fitting for the classroom but it's more difficult to conduct a church service without speaking. Luckily, my congregation guess I am pregnant the moment they arrive in church. Without meaning to, I have erected the pillars in baby shades of pink or blue, freshly painted as a nursery. The whole place is awash with cherubs. Chubby faces are embroidered on hassocks, curly locks are carved on pews and tiny hands and feet patter all over the stained glass windows. There is giggling from the undercroft, and crying from the spire; nappies are hanging up to dry in the vestry, and floating in the font is what can only be described as a rubber duck.

My parishioners crowd to the altar, full of comments and questions that are not particularly polite to ask in church.

"Tell them I have taken a vow of silence," I say to Juno telepathically. "Today's service will be a meditation of thanks."

"Perhaps Hazel can sing a little song," she replies.

"What song?" says Hazel.

"Can't you make one up," says Juno, "for the occasion."

This seems a bit much to ask. My poor sister is supposed to be in a trance, saving her energy for the next art therapy session; not conducting my church service for me.

"I don't mind," she says, reading my thoughts. "But isn't there already a prayer, a sequel to the pregnancy one, for when it's confirmed?"

"Of course, the Confirmation!" I cry inwardly. "Thank goodness you remembered. Do you know how it goes?"

"Not off the top of my head," Hazel replies. "But if you hum it, I'll say it out loud."

Ab ovo, ad vitam
hoc opus, hic labor est
hunc manhood, nunc compare
(saw him in his underwear)
omne trinum est perfectum;
pater, mater and child.

I whisper this shyly in my sister's inner ear, and she sings it aloud; gregarious chanting. I'm ashamed to admit I haven't sung it since I trained to be a priestess, though. The old language is rather inaccessible and I'm not sure that I got all the Latin words right. But 'omne trinum est perfectum' has always been a pet phrase of mine. It means 'everything in threes is perfect', which seems a shame as my family is about to become four.

My congregation don't spot the irony, though. Hazel sings the song again, and the spell it weaves is so strong that I don't have to speak. After the third time, the hush in my hallowed space is holding itself up. Each member of the church has erected a pillar of their own peace. My sister stops singing, and I hold my breath. The concentration stays in place, as if it were made of consecrated stone.

Clasping my hands, I send a surge of thanksgiving to the rafters, where imaginary babies coo and cluck like birds. Still without a word, the sound of their cherub wings will be my prayer.

"Sis!" hisses Hazel. "Look!"

I open my eyes and am taken by surprise. The singalo girl is walking up the aisle towards me. Walking, up, she has reached the sixth pair of pillars, effortlessly it seems.

Something in this morning's service, my silence perhaps, has made it easier for her to enter. The quiet meditation must have let her in. The light in my church suits her. Her eyes are candle-bright.

"Hello," says Eurynome. You know the one I mean; her name sounds different every time we say it. "I've got something to tell you," she says.

The singalo's breath is fragrant as a puff of incense in my face, but I frown.

"Say hello and welcome," I tell my mother telepathically. "Say that you are speaking for me, because I am up the duff."

But before Mum can repeat this, the girl speaks again.

"I have to whisper it," she says, "in Angela's ear."

Something moves within me, a memory I haven't had yet, like a baby kick.

"It's the name of the godchild, isn't it?" I say, to Juno and Hazel. "She is the one who's been telling everybody the name of the third god!"

"You must be right," says Juno, slowly. "Let's face it. There aren't any other secrets to keep."

From the high altar, we stare at Eurynome, looking a bit like a goddess herself with a halo of light from the rose window.

"It's the pink pantheon," Hazel utters, as if a feminist movement were being founded in front of us. "The child of god must be a girl."

"A goddaughter?"

My regional accent rings around the pillars and up into the church roof, with a 'heid awa and shite' that brings the congregation back down to the ground; where their concentration scatters like mosaic pieces across the floor.

They've heard of this blaspheming singalo too. There's a murmuring in the pews, as they look at her solid, single outline moving up the fluid, fluorescent aisle of our church. A tutting as she takes another step towards the altar, a muttering as they look at me to defend their sacred space. But as priestess, it is my job to have the most open mind of all.

"Come o'er here ye wee scunner," I cry to the girl who's travelled the world and maybe more to tell me her news.

In the pews there is an uproar, a downpour; it is raining cant and dogma.

"If the gods wanted us to know their child's name," shouts someone, "they would have told us ages ago."

"We believed in Lee and Sheela before we knew what their names were," cries another parishioner. "That's what faith is all about."

"But if you tell us the godchild is a He or a She," says a third crossly, "we'll lose the balance of our religion."

The singalo girl is starting to break up. With the poor reception to her presence, she flickers against the ecclesiastical backdrop, and fades out.

"I promise you," she says, "there will still be symmetry."

Her voice is static; her after-image is moving down the aisle between six pairs of pillars. I watch her go and wish I could follow to find out where she is coming from. As Eurynome disappears through the church door, it is as if a draft has blown all the candles out.

I sigh, both in my silly outer voice and my sensible inner one. The congregation are still shouting after the singalo girl; their comments are as coarse as sailors with the boat rocked, as saucy as apples with the cart overturned.

"But you believe her, don't you Angela?" asks Hazel silently, inside my head.

Yes, I do. The truth is, it's hard enough for a singalo to enter a proper person's church; it must be impossible if she's come to tell a lie. If only I had my normal voice I would give the congregation a stiff talking to:

Ladies and gentlemen, loosen up, I would say. Get down on your knees and pray. This is a message from the gods. Why can't you hear it? Are you sulking because you wanted to be first to receive the divine revelation? Are you angry that it wasn't directly addressed to you?

But my speech would have no clout, spoken in the highland tones of a northern lass. It would have no authority, in the drawl of a gal from the deep south.

For now, I must make do with body language. Raising my arms, palms facing toward the crowd, a stream of words pours from each hand. Two rays of golden light, endless gleaming sentences, glowing beams of meaning. None of us are literate, but we wrote the book on unconditional love.

My niggly, annoying little flock shut up abruptly as the message hits them. Shooting bliss into their silent midst, I swear that as soon as I get my voice back, proper people will hear what that singalo girl has to say.

*

Alison's phone rang. She picked it up and said hello, still finishing the last sentence with one finger. It was the girl who lived downstairs; with a revelation about the man they both loved, in different ways.

"Simon's got a girlfriend!"

As Alison punched the full-stop, she felt it in her heart.

"Who is she? How did they meet? He never goes anywhere without us, never goes anywhere, except work." Her finger was frozen, but her voice flowed. "And the women he works with, he always says every one's a minger. On-line, that must be it; she's a cyber-chick. Love in a chat room, but he's utterly unfeeling in real life..."

"He says she first appeared at the Christmas party," explained Pinky, "and apparently he fixed her car. He says she is perfect."

Alison was doubly troubled, now; by events in the flesh and her prediction of them on paper.

“Just don’t tell me she’s pregnant!” she sobbed. “He and I... we always knew I was a five out of ten; but I still hoped he might wake up one day and realise ... that was all he needed.”

“You’re breaking up.”

“I can hardly hear you.”

“I’m on the train...” The human with dyed pink hair shouted.

It’s quite clever. The invention of the telephone; no less spectacular than our being telepathic. The electric train; no less sophisticated than our being able to fly. I can hardly hear her either as I zoom to the next scene, but somehow the parallel tracks of our separate worlds have come together at a certain point, like a painter’s attempt to show the perspective of long distance. Her phone is cordless, and I’m just psychic, but still somehow we’ve got our wires crossed. It’s almost as if we’re linked by a different sort of umbilical cord as I listen in to the conversation of the two human females prophesying.

“Have you seen her?”

“No, but he says she’s a ten!”

“He’s never given anything ten in his whole life... film, football match, food. The highest he’s ever gone is eight and a half...”

“But he’s never lied to us either, has he? Oh, hang on... going into a tunnel...”

I shut my eyes tighter as we fly. Back comes my complete lack of body, the absolute emptiness of the space we’re travelling through. Shame, I was quite enjoying the tug of emotions as heavy as clay. The dragging sensation, you might call it my day-dream.

When we arrive at the centre for distressed singalos, the doors are open and the sound of laughter is coming from inside. We ring for the family of social workers. The Head appears grinning, followed by the others.

“A little bird tells us that someone’s in an interesting condition,” Neckola says.

I nod politely, but don’t speak.

“She’s taken a vow of silence,” says Juno, “for the duration of the pregnancy.”

“Got a funny voice, then?” Kneena giggles.

I nod.

"Come on, let's hear it," the social workers say persuasively, "please."

"Tell them," I say to Juno telepathically, "that I'm looking forward to sinking into a nice quiet trance during art therapy."

She repeats this message aloud.

"Ay, lassie," the family of social workers say, shaking my hand and drawing us all into the day centre, "but there's a lad 'ere wants to have a word with you, afore ye start."

The instant we're in the therapy room, I see Sighman. I see him, but I don't understand why he's there. In proper people's circles, as soon as a pregnancy is confirmed, the lucky man has no more to do with the mother-to-be. He reappears briefly at the birth, and thereafter may meet sometimes with his angelic children; but is generally considered surplus to requirements, in the nicest possible way.

Sighman struts across the room to us.

"Hello," says Juno. "This is a strange singalo tradition."

"What is?" asks Sighman.

"The father expressing an interest in his unborn spawn," she replies.

Sighman recoils slightly.

"During the gender wars," he says, "males and females fought to the death for custody of their kids; and even though I'm not a real singalo, I still consider absent fatherhood a crime."

"How fascinating," says Juno.

Sighman smiles shyly at me. I smile shyly back.

"He's waiting for you to speak," whispers Hazel.

"Tell him I can't," I say telepathically.

"My sister is sworn to silence," she says.

"Because of a funny voice?"

"Yes," says Hazel. "She has a regional accent."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," Sighman says. "She's pregnant, she should be proud."

"It would not be particularly polite," my sister replies, "for Angela to talk in front of you. Don't take it personally."

"But..."

"She will not open her gob," says my mother. "For you or anyone."

She clenches her own lips tightly as the social workers get everyone into a circle for the therapy to begin. The distressed singalos look relaxed and happy today. There is a noticeable lack of rocking, spinning and futile knitting; and everyone is wearing lovely new jumpers.

As my sister gets the yellow going, and the room warms up, people peel off these jumpers and throw them on the floor. Skin glows with perspiration; not ours, of course, but I feel the orange growing inside me. When it is ripe it fills me completely. There would be stretch-marks, if I had anything as superficial as skin.

I feel self-conscious, sitting so naked across the circle from Sighman. It's weird that he's here. For us, the aftermath feels even more intimate than the moment. When we were having sex I could look him in the eye but now I feel embarrassed.

The red pulsates and Hazel starts to sing a song from nature's womb, where male and female principles unify, where the ruddy light is criss-crossed with veins of purple.

Mama is making eyes for me
using magic innocently
Mama is building me strong white bones
under the orders of her hormones
Mama is making me hair and teeth
cleverly out of the food she eats
Mama is making me fingers and toes
while sitting and knitting my babygros

Mama is making eyes for me
Papa made some previously
Mama is building me strong white bones
Papa is building us all a home
Mama is making me hair and teeth
Papa is bringing us food to eat
Mama is making me fingers and toes
Papa is feeling their baby grow

"Careful," I murmur, "or I might give birth prematurely."

But in reply she lets another wave of purple wash over us all, like a splash of paint. A singalo cries out, and the family of social workers give an emergency signal, a shout of alarm; it's an art attack.

My sister retraces her steps, back over the red, orange and yellow, as if they were accidental footprints on a dustsheet. We stop and open our eyes, the dusky motes of colour settling around the room. Still illicit no matter how many times we do it, mauve lust, heather dust; violet is the druggiest of all the colours.

Sighman is still sitting there, purple glitter in his hair, and beside him is Eugenie, who made it as far as the sixth pair of pillars of my church. She smiles at me, but distantly, as if we had never met before.

"It's her again," I hiss.

"The pink pantheon," says my mum, telepathically.

"Let's ask her the name of god in her own territory," mutters Hazel.

The three of us can move easily toward a single person in the artificial environment of the day room. Sighman thinks we're coming to talk to him, and steps forward to meet us.

"Did you enjoy it?" Hazel puts on her singalo-speaking voice.

"Very fitting, very apt," he gushes. "How was it for you, Angela?"

I smile and nod primly.

"If you'll excuse us," says Juno, "we need a word with your member of staff."

We sidestep him, but I cannot miss the expression on his face. We took advantage of him, using his body and his mental powers to get me pregnant; and now we don't want to know him. We think we're so superior I won't even stoop to talk to him, though it's his baby I'm carrying.

All this in a single look. I would say I am developing a telepathic relationship with this male, if I thought it were possible. But the singalo girl is absolutely impenetrable. She stands and stares at us, with what you would call her arms folded, while Juno tries to ask her for the moon, the unmentionable, that which cannot be spoken. In a friendly fashion, my mum explains; we want to know the unknowable, name the X factor, ascertain the *Je ne sais quoit*.

Eugenie's expression does not alter an inch, even after Juno repeats the question. Up close, her complexion is as flawless as a waxwork's. In fact, the only

indication she gives us that she is alive, is to flick her eyes to the place where Sighman was standing, and back again quickly.

I follow her gaze, and give a start when I see that Sighman has gone.

"Perhaps," Juno persists with the singalo girl, "you could tell us your name? It seems to sound different every time we hear it."

And when she says it, it sounds different again.

"We mostly call you the pink pantheon," says Hazel.

Eugenie smiles serenely, but still doesn't speak.

I meanwhile am howling in a Yorkshire gale, screaming in scouse, storming in Hampshire where hurricanes 'ardly ever 'appen. My regional accents let rip as I sob on the outside too. I know I was a bitch to Sighman, but he has to understand that proper people have their ways, and making lifetime commitments to singalos isn't one of them.

Juno intervenes, as my catalogue of dialect gets to Aussie angst. It's not alphabetical, unlike the best translations, and my Swedish swearing is threatening to undo all of Hazel's brilliant art therapy.

"Shut up, darling," mum says, as only she can; with the 'Shut' a kiss but the 'darling' a dagger. "You're upsetting the singalos."

The family of social workers slap oil on the waters, surfing us to the door of the day centre, and waving us off. It's time for our next appointment.

"Get packing," they say; and so we will, and so will they, for we're all off together tonight, on a visionary vacation.

*

Every so often, we have a dream that makes the others look like a day-trip: a special occasion as long as the summer holidays. There's no need for us to heave suitcases onto hired buses, but the preparations are still important; for when the dream begins we are set down in the middle of a baking hot location and we must have applied sun-tan lotion, factor 1,000,000 for proper people without skin.

Every year we go somewhere different and this time it is a ruined city, the remains of an ancient civilisation, in a valley between two classical mountains. Goats are roasting in the heat and the scent of herbs rises as we walk down the

track, scratching our ankles on scrubby bushes of thyme and oregano lining the path.

There must be fifty plus of us, strung out along the road. The Kennedys, their friends the Smiths, the social workers, the Bonifaces from church; five families, split up into individuals by this dream state, stumbling down the mountainside like tourists in strappy sandals.

My sister is at the front of the group with the Kennedy boys, talking about music and looking for hallucinogenic plants. I am bringing up the rear with Madge Kennedy, both of us equally encumbered by pregnancy, but sharing a certain lumbering excitement. Juno is somewhere in the centre of the party, keenly discussing the historical sights we are going to see.

The dusty track gives way to deserted streets on the edge of a city; and Ray Kennedy, who has somehow contrived to bring with him a map of the dream, guides us through a mythic labyrinth to our run-down hotel. The buildings are hewn from the same pink stone as the mountains, as old and eroded as the mountains too, with crumbling cornices and tumbling pillars around every corner. Much of the architecture is a mere facade; half the faded house fronts have nothing behind them but gardens of fallen rubble and tall weeds.

We do not see a soul on our journey. The sun is high; it's siesta time for everyone except us dreamers. When we arrive at our hotel, its face a graceful yawn showing broken balustrades, a sleepy proprietor opens the door.

"Hello," he says, smoothing his tousled head. "I'm Hypnos."

The people we meet in our dreams, the indigenous populations of these distant lands, are not as proper as us. At first glance they look normal enough, but they can never meet our gazes for the faraway look in their own eyes; and they have funny ways of talking that will only make Madge and I, with our pregnant accents, feel at home. I bet Hypnos never acts spontaneously and everything he says sounds scripted.

"Can I help you?" the hotelier asks. He doesn't look surprised to see so many holidaymakers on the doorstep, even though none of us are sure if we made reservations in advance.

"We don't need bedrooms," Ray is explaining, "because we're actually asleep already. But we need somewhere to leave our luggage, and advice about what to do and see in this city, please."

Hypnos steps back into the shuttered dimness of the hall, and we all enter, feeling the floor change to cool marble beneath our feet.

"Walk this way," says the hotelier, and five families are soon following up stairs and down corridors, behind the white toga-clad figure.

At the top of the steepest flight of stairs, Hypnos glances back at us with a yawn, before leading the way down the narrowest corridor. This is lined with doors, and the hotelier pushes each one open as he passes. Light streams through the apertures, criss-crossing on the landing, from the unshuttered windows of the attic rooms.

We leave our baggage in these empty chambers. Most of the stuff we've brought with us is unnecessary, manifestations of the things we cling to whether at home or abroad. For example, Ray Kennedy carries an important looking briefcase in monogrammed leather; the social workers have battered holdalls; and my sister, as the trip's official artist, is struggling with a paintbox, wad of paper, and a musical instrument the size of a double bass in a case. Madge and I carry baby bags, bursting with nappies and bottles, which materialised with us as we arrived in the dream.

There are bathrooms at the end of our attic corridor, with exposed plumbing like fossilised spaghetti; and when we've freshened up, all five families go out together to find something foreign to eat. As we're leaving the hotel, the somnolent proprietor appears again in the hallway. He props himself up on a wall checked olive green and black, as Ray asks him to recommend an eating establishment nearby.

"Ancient or modern?" asks Hypnos, in a local accent flattened by the ring of insurmountable mountains. There's no way out of this dream by road or track; its peaks are Olympic.

After a group discussion we decide on ancient. Hypnos gives a sleepy nod and walks off, up the short garden path lined with bougainvillea. We follow him along the cracked pavement, where slabs of terracotta-tinted stone overlap each other like tectonic plates preparing for an earthquake. He keeps walking, bare-footed over the undulating terrain; his toga pale as feta cheese, lifting in the warm wind to reveal legs that are clad in pyjama trousers, striped in Greek yoghurt and honey colours.

We climb to the top of the town, to a restaurant on the edge of civilisation, whose cultivated gardens gradually merge into the mountainside. It has a broad patio, with a chipped mosaic-tiled floor, and worn marble-topped tables and weathered wooden chairs which overlook the old city. We sit down gratefully, exclaiming with delight at the untidy backdrop of houses tumbling down the sheer mountain slopes, glowing pepper pink in the setting sun.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” sleep-talks our hotelier, “meet your host for this evening; Mr Myth.”

The door to the taverna has a curtain to keep the flies out. It’s made of amber beads, scallop shells, stones the same shade as the rosy city, broken mosaic tiles, cracked pieces of ancient pottery, the bones of local ancestors. It rattles in the early evening breeze. Not a mosquito would dare to tackle the history, the humanity it represents with a tinkle and clatter.

Through this curtain comes Mr Myth. It seems to part for him with the swish of a more sophisticated sea, its shells full of life again, the insects preserved in amber buzzing. The restaurateur appears, in the part that he has rehearsed since those vertebrae were fleshed and threaded with sinew instead of dreaming string.

“Greetings, proper peeps, I am the Maitre d’,” he says. “Welcome to one evening in forever; where the food is flavoured with thyme. What would you like?”

“We haven’t seen a menu yet,” Ray uses his voice for foreigners, the hard of hearing, or people who live in dreams.

“It’s goat,” says Mr Myth. “But what do you really want?”

He clicks his finger at Hypnos, who suddenly flicks a brilliant white serviette over his arm, wiping silver cutlery to almost unbearable brightness on it as he starts to lay the tables.

Mr Myth picks up one of the carefully-placed forks, examines it closely, then spits on it, rubbing it clean with the edge of his toga.

“You have come to a land of great spiritual richness,” he says. “There may not be so much to eat, but we have a lot of religious character. How many gods you people got, eh? Three you say; that’s nothing. We got too many gods to count. More divinity than hot dinners. You like to see some, huh? That can be arranged. What you people eat at home? Nothing you say; you’re gonna love my goat!”

He turns, fork still in his hand and points it trident-like at our hotelier. Hypnos runs into the taverna, rattling the bones of the kitchen curtain as he goes. Most of us don't take our eyes off Mr Myth, in his greasy black toga with tails and frilled white tunic underneath. But Mavis, who is looking the other way, swears she sees the hotelier running out of the back door of the building and up the mountain, where he disappears into the bushes with a glint of steel in the long rays of the late afternoon sun.

"And it's not just the full immortals, we've got nymphs and oracles, sibyls and sylphs," goes on our host, nudging Ray Kennedy. "Know what I mean?"

He takes a small scroll out of the shiny folds of his dress-suit, unrolls it and sniffs it.

"Mmm, dryads," he adds. "So, what can I get you? There's every god here from A to Z. Oh, I've got it! You're a Zeus man. Thunderbolts and lightning, very very frightening!"

Ray looks slightly more taken with this than the nibbles and nubles.

"Nicely blackened!" the head-waiter goes on. "Served on a bed of clouds. Sorted! Now, who's next?"

Most of the young men on the trip seem to fancy the nymphs and sylphs.

"Does the oracle do oral?" calls out a Kennedy boy, in the clamour to give orders to Mr Myth.

"That's all she does," sighs the Maitre D'. "If you want something stronger, I can do you a Dionysus. Tomorrow morning at ten."

"Have you got a God of War?" calls another man.

"Ah yes," says Mr Myth, consulting what at first seemed to be a waiter's notepad but now looks like a cross between a bible and a guidebook. "Ares. And you can see him tomorrow at two."

The Bonifaces, from my congregation, are looking uncomfortable.

"We didn't know it was going to be so pagan," they whisper to me.

I nod piously, as befits a high priestess of the proper church; but across the table from me the head social worker is booking a visit to see Artemis.

"Hunting?" she asks. "Does that come with a bow and arrow?"

"And all the dead goat you can eat!" concludes Mr Myth. He suddenly turns and scans the mountainside behind the taverna; his eye seems to follow a path down to the back door, then he lifts his nose and sniffs the air.

“It needs more herbs,” he gives a euro shrug, and hurries off towards the kitchen door, swiping a large sprig of rosemary that’s growing up between pink patio stones, as he goes.

“This is great, isn’t it girls!” Ma Kennedy leans over the table towards us, squeezing out inches of squashy cleavage from her holiday top. She is indeed a mother, but that’s not why they call her ma; it’s short for Marilyn Monroe. She’s normally surrounded by men who adore her, like cousin Ray, her strapping nephews and sons; but now the cords that tie them are left at home with the wilting plants and the pile of mail on the doormat, she’s sitting on an all-female table. It includes me, Juno and Hazel, Madge and Mavis and two of our social worker friends. We’ve been discussing the miracle cure of Surely.

“The singalos have been less distressed since you started your sessions,” says Neckola, “but we never expected one would start to speak.”

“There’s Dot too,” adds Kneena, “she’s stopped spinning. And Pat Crash is learning to walk without the aid of a mobility image.”

“He’s put all his old zimmer-frames out to grass,” laughs her sister, “along with the runaway sit-on lawnmower and the inflatable dinosaur!”

Mr Myth reappears on the patio with plates that he hurls at his guests with the incision of an Olympic discus thrower. Each clay-white round continues to spin on the table in front of our places.

“And how about you, ladies?” he inquires, as the clattering subsides. “Can I tempt you with an immortal morsel. Some dishy Adonis. Huh?”

“Well,” Ma Kennedy turns her wobbling cleavage towards him, “it does sound delicious.”

“But Angela won’t be interested in anything like that,” says Juno. “She’s in a delicate condition.”

Separated from her by the dream, it feels so wrong to be spoken for that I could scream. A pneumatic performance of my pregnant voice seems preferable to her perfunctory proprietorialism... Oh, please; the words can’t all start with P. I’m going to push...

“...for more culture. Beyond the diaphanous clothing, the debauched bell-ringing and wine bottle-clinging of your phallic trumpeters and their cymbal shaking go-go goddesses; there’s more to this place than voluptuous living. And more to your theology than naked addiction,” I find myself preaching.

“The god of war does nothing for us; we’re peaceful people. Artists, educators, healers; if you want to impress, show us the embodiment of music, the essence of dance, the origins of poetry. I’ll imbibe from that source; a drink that enlightens but does not inebriate. I’ll cavort with ideas clad in more substantial material than the goat-hair thong of your Adonis.

“Oh, I get it,” says Mr Myth, nodding wisely. “You want to meet the Muses.”

It’s not easy to schedule nine of us to see nine of them at the same time, but eventually he manages to make us an appointment for nine o’clock tomorrow morning.

The sun has almost set by the time Hypnos wheels a big trolley out of the taverna kitchen, with a silver dish cover reflecting the final beams. He bumps it over the uneven mosaic of patio stones, so that the thing under the lid seems to buck and rear as if it might escape.

“I hope you cooked it properly!” says our host.

So do we; our dream stomachs came to life as we fell asleep and they’re churning with real world digestive juices, a mercury-coloured whirl in the gut of each transparent body.

When the waiter lifts the quicksilver dome with a flourish, the slow-roasted animal on the plate is clearly dead.

“That’s a goat, isn’t it,” says Ray Kennedy.

“With sage and thyme, sir,” says Hypnos.

We all raise our eyebrows at each other and wince as he attacks it with a carving knife. His blade reflects the blood-red sunset, but the meat is well-done. If one can slice flesh lovingly, cut considerately round bone and serve the carcass with tender care then Hypnos does; but it takes ages. The stars are coming out by the time the hotelier hands us the final plate of meat and heads back into the kitchen, trundling the empty trolley more easily over the stones.

“Er, could we have something to drink?” Ray calls after him.

Hypnos shows no signs of having heard this, but when we are chewing the last grisly mouthfuls of goat-meat, he returns with two brimming jugs of liquid.

“Alcoholic, or non-alcoholic?” he asks.

“I’ll have non-alcoholic please,” I say.

“Me too,” says Madge.

He is pouring us each a cup of something thin and yellowy.

"What is that?" I ask.

"Goats milk," he replies.

Everyone else opts for the alcoholic drink.

"Why not?" says Ray. "We are on holiday, after all." His relaxed tone changes as he watches the hotelier filling his glass.

"What is that?" he asks.

"Fermented goats milk," Hypnos replies.

Anyone who drinks it deserves to get rat-arsed. It's the most disgusting-looking substance I've ever seen. Greenish, where mine is yellow; not actually green, I won't say that. More like what becomes of green when it's dead.

Everyone who drinks it is soon laughing at nothing and singing power ballads with irreverent words, and doing humorous burps which their mates grade out of ten. Hypnos places some sturdy candles around the terrace; and in their flickering light, begins to belly-dance in the same stoical manner with which he served us the meal.

We raise our eyebrows higher than ever and try to keep down the giggles, as he belly-dances around us in phlegmatic circles. Ray Kennedy is finding the hotelier's androgynous form particularly hard to stomach, and clears his throat loudly as he passes.

"Could we have something to finish the meal," he asks. "Some dessert, perhaps, or cheese?"

"Cheese," says Hypnos, in that flat mountain accent, abandoning the dance and trudging to the kitchen without a backward glance.

With a wind-chime tinkle of the beaded curtain he disappears, and almost in the same breath of tinkling air his boss appears. Mr Myth comes across the cracked marble floor, unrolling the waiter's notebook of goatskin vellum.

Maybe for one moment we think he's going to read us a list of cheeses; but the impression fades as fast as today's date stamped in warm camembert. The Maitre d' has enough on his plate keeping the laws of our dream, of this holiday, in order.

"Okay proper peeps," he says, "to make your meetings with the mythical characters go more smoothly, here are three 'do's and 'don't's. Don't try to catch your god or goddess's eye; like everybody here they is not designed to hold your gaze. Don't invite them back to your place; they belong in a mythical context, and

won't work the same way in your hotel room. Don't think they're too good for you; even immortals can be immoral, init. Polytheism will always lead to jealous plots; whether there is a hundred gods like ours or three like yours. Only in a world with one god is he perfect; know what I mean."

Now, a member of my church congregation, Tacitus Boniface, can't keep quiet any longer.

"One god? Just as improbable as a hundred!" he snorts. "There are three gods; that was revealed to us. Not in a dream, in reality. Bloody barbarians; this is the last time I'm going on holiday. Foreign parts? More like pagan farts!"

Mr Myth spits out a bit of goat gristle and speaks more clearly.

"If this is Sir's final visit to our world, he will want to make the most of every meeting. Here are three 'do's to get the best sport from those Olympic deities.

"Do flatter them; gods and goddesses is susceptible to the old brown tongue and will be pleased to see you prostrating yourself. Do flirt with them; sometimes it's the only language they understand. Speak with the pelvic thrust, eh. Do take them presents. They hate being in the past."

"Stuff and nonsense."

Tacitus, the spokesman of my church congregation, gives an unholy belch as the jug of fermented goats milk is drained; and Hypnos returns, carrying some very crumbly white rounds of cheese.

"This is delicious," Juno tries to be polite with her mouth full. "Such a delicate flavour."

"And such a fragile texture," says Ma Kennedy, sitting next to her.

"That's because it's so fresh," my mum replies.

"What sort of cheese is it?" asks one of the Kennedy boys, distrustfully.

"Goat, at a guess," says Juno, looking at the hotelier.

He nods, before starting to stack up piles of dirty plates and take them away to the kitchen, staggering under their weight. During the pauses in our riotous conversation and drunken laughter, we hear the sounds of washing up coming from behind the beaded curtain, the splashing of soapy water and scraping of greasy china.

"Do you think he's doing it all himself?" whispers Hazel.

"A one-man goat-roast? No, there must be somebody helping," says Mavis; but Mr Myth overhears her.

“One man ferment milk, one man churn cheese; one man work with an arm that go so fast it just a blur. He is doing it all single-handedly, init.”

“Why don’t you employ someone else?” asks Juno.

Mr Myth holds his sides and shakes with laughter. Though his toga predates the idea of splitting at the seams, it is certainly straining.

“You can’t get the people, these days,” he says. “We is all gods and no mortals.”

Everybody laughs. Even though I've only drunk the un-fermented goat's milk, I'm in high holiday humour too; and it's starting to get light again before any of us feel remotely like coming down from the mountain and returning to the hotel. A few hardy birds have started to sing, in that same flat accent, when the hotelier emerges from the kitchen, drying his hands on the robes that are now dirty as a dishcloth.

We follow, falling over ourselves and each other, as he walks wearily on cobblestones kissed by their billionth dawn and made peachy again after the grey of the night. Not a soul is stirring behind the shutters of tumbledown houses.

Back at the hotel, the row of rooms on one side of the attic corridor are filling slowly with a warm light, while the rooms on the other side of the building are still cool and dim, their windows showing no sign of the sunrise.

Splitting into twos and threes we go into our separate rooms to do the things we can only do on holiday. We lay out sets of clean clothes, look for sockets to plug in our travel irons and hair dryers; and unpack flannels and towels for the thrill of feeling water on our dream skin.

I go off in search of an empty bathroom, but find a commotion going on in several of the hotel bedrooms.

"What's up?" I ask, knocking at a half open door.

A Boniface appears, looking confused and cross.

"Someone has been in here," he says. "Our suitcases are open and all the stuff has been thrown around."

"Great Lee and Sheela!" I say, sticking my head round the door to see. The room does indeed look like a tantrum of the gods we've been arguing about.

Other people are coming out into the corridor now, many of them making the same complaint. Their luggage has been tampered with, and their personal belongings strewn all around.

"Has anything been stolen?" asks Ray Kennedy, striding up and down.

We only know this word in dreams, and then only with scant understanding. In the real world, we don't have belongings; nothing that could be taken away from us. The definition of a personal possession is just a smile or a skill or a nice memory: something that simply wouldn't work for anyone else.

Imagine that your treasured commodities were like this, televisions would only tune in for their rightful owners, silver would tarnish in the hands of a thief, and stolen clothes would fall off the body they didn't belong to; and then you might understand why we've never witnessed a robbery before.

In the more material world of our dream, I suppose such a thing is possible; but, because no one really knew what they were bringing with them (the contents of our symbolic suitcases being as much a surprise for us as our roommates when we unpacked) no one really knows if anything is missing.

We all pull together to help gather up the scattered ephemera, wondering what could have gone on in these vacant hotel rooms while we were out. One family group amongst us have been particularly hit; the Smiths. Friends of the Kennedys, we've met them in many previous dreams. Theirs is a common name, but they have an unusual nature; a daughter in a coma, still attached. Evadne; the one who got lost in the house, where I had my maternity message upstairs while my green-eyed mate waited in the basement. Her unconscious form has been carried by the family ever since; her mother whispering constant pleas to wake up, constant reassurances that the world is still as it was.

In the hotel bedroom, Mrs Smith's things, the damp sponge and thermometer of her wistful ministrations, have been violently tossed aside; just like the books and bottles of suntan lotion belonging to the rest of the family. The Kennedys have had their watches and wallets and mobile phones pinched, and in the Boniface's rooms the bible has been unbound, and unstrung rosary beads are rolling all over the marble floor. Five families run downstairs to confront the hotelier.

His dark eyes don't give anything away. In the face of such a blank stare, our complaints don't get anywhere. We're advanced enough beings to let it go, at that, and ask him for directions to the mythical meeting places instead. It is nearly time to visit the local deities.

First stop is the temple of Hermes, where most of the Smiths want to get off. Hypnos has changed into a clean white toga, which he hitches more tightly over a sexless shoulder and sets off, out of the shadowy vestibule into the garden where morning has broken. Holding up the folds of his robe, he walks down the overgrown path to the road then stumbles off over the cracked stone slabs with weeds rearing between them in the opposite direction to the way we went last night. This time there is only a short walk before we arrive at our destination.

We come to a halt in front of a pair of enormous metal gates; the sort of thing that might once have been plated with gold, but now are pure rust. Their scale is so huge and their substance so crumbly, that our host simply breaks off one of the bars and makes a space big enough for us all to pass through.

Inside the grounds we see the temple straight away. I've never seen my own church from the outside, having to be in it for it to exist; but I recognise certain similarities.

The temple of Hermes has a spire, not straight up and down like mine, but spiralling. Topped with a sign, but not like yours either, no cross or windspun cockerel; more like a caduceus. At its tip a pair of wings are spread, and down its side coil a pair of snakes. The whole thing is moving, mercurial.

Through a door that opens as the two snake's tails part appears the god himself, though it's hard to focus on him. Winged hat, winged sandals; golden curls and short tunic ruffled in his own breeze.

In a wavering voice Hypnos calls out the names of those who booked to see this deity; and five people break away from the main group and walk across the lawn towards the temple. Yes, it's a million miles away from yours and mine; no windows to let in the light, none of the beauty of a flying buttress, or even the ugliness of a gargoyle. Its walls are featureless, except for a scrawling of graffiti.

"What does it say?" I whisper to our hotelier.

He tries to look wise though I can tell he can't read it either.

"Oh," he says slowly, "that's hermetic writing."

Then he turns on the sloping lawn of parched grass above this closed church, and addresses the rest of the group like a tour guide.

"The temple is best appreciated from the inside," he says. "Apparently, it's full of business contacts and everyone gets winged helmets and wads of Monopoly money."

Although he hadn't pre-booked one of the Kennedy boys rushes to join the party going through the snake-tail double doors.

"Wait for me," he calls after Hermes, then shouts over his shoulder at our host; "Tell Athena I'm sorry!"

"She won't like it," mutters Hypnos, leading us back through the disused gates of the temple, where jasmine tendrils shake their incense smell over us, whether we're baptised in this mythical faith or not.

"Next stop, the Muses."

Hypnos sighs and consults his scroll.

"Imagine the sound of the lyre: Apollo's instrument, with nine strings, one for each of these lovely ladies."

"And one for each of us," I say.

"I've only got eight names down here," he taps his vellum, testily. "Angela, Juno, Hazel; Madge and Mavis Kennedy, Ma Kennedy, Neckola and Kneena from the Centre for Distressed Singalos. That's what it says here." A sleepless night gets to the guy who lives in dreamland.

"But there are nine Muses," he struggles to recall. "Calliope, oldest and best; Muse of philosophy and epic poetry. Clio is the Muse of historical and heroic poetry. Melponene and Thalia, Muses of tragedy and comedy. Polyhymnia, Muse of the sacred song. Erato, of course, erotica; Urania, science-fiction. Terpsichore is the Muse of dance. And Euterpe is the Muse of music, whose name means delight. Nine," he yawns as he stumbles uphill, and the cracked stone pavement crumbles into dirt track.

"I'm sure there were nine of us too," I say, looking back at my group of girlfriends, tripping along like sightseers with insensible footwear.

"Picture the scene," he pulls my focus back, "the base of Mount Helicon. Bleating of goats and the beguiling sound of the panpipes. A beautiful youth gazing at his reflection in a stream, a girl whose voice is only his echo, another pretty maiden turned into a tree. Everywhere spirits you can only half see, and demi-gods disguised as animals. Take care, as we climb up Mount Helicon, for nothing is as it seems."

"I can hear singing," says Hazel.

“Yes, that’ll be them,” Hypnos goes on lugubriously. “They’re high, you know, on hellebore. A nine-leaved black stimulant plant, native to Helicon. They chew laurel too; gets them out of their heads.”

“I thought they just wore it as a crown.”

“Apollo does,” he tells me. “He’s sober; but the girls are off their faces.”

“Great singing, though,” Hazel surges ahead, up the mountain.

Necky and Kneena are struggling along behind her.

“I hope they won’t make us dance.”

“This is going to be as bad as art therapy.”

“Why did we let her talk us into it?”

“I did say Adonis sounded like a nice idea.”

“He’s not a god, silly!” Neckola sighs. “He’s probably the bloke who cleans at Hypnos’ hotel.”

“I didn’t see any cleaner.”

“What did the man just say? Nothing is as it seems. Oh look! Through the bushes... it’s them...it’s the Muses... they’re dancing!”

We all rush to get our first glimpse; two thirds of the way up the mountain, in a clearing, by a spring. Three times three, goddesses of creativity; an ennead in off-the-shoulder floaty numbers. They’re literally holding hands and dancing in a circle; skirts flowing, hair blowing; buzzing like bees on cocaine, glowing like sunbeams on ecstasy. They don’t actually use those drugs though; it’s the slimy vaginal juices of a mare in heat and the hippomanes, or caul of the new-born foal, that gets these girls going.

I wish I could say that one was black and one was fat and one had only one leg. I’d like to point out the lesbian, the single mother, the one with a tribal tattoo; but the look is pure European. Their dance is the curve of croissants, pasta twists, spinning pizza bases. It folds like those triangular Greek pastries; crinkles like a walnut shell. It is the whirl of caramel, the swirl of brown sugar in a café au lait. Subtle shades from toffee to coffee, tan to *pain*, make up the colour palate of the Muses.

Where they differ is their ages. One is just a teenager, and one is in her twenties; there’s a thirty-something, forty-something and fifty-something Muse, all dancing in the circle. As they turn about it almost seems each lady grows older before our eyes; the seventy year old, eighty and ninety year-old Muses wear the

same translucent togas; and the flowers adorning their silken tresses are still as fresh. Even the geriatric ones have Adriatic blue eyes. Youth and age blend seamlessly into each other as the circle slowly turns. Is it that they're not actually dancing, but standing still as the years pass over their feminine forms?

Hypnos is hypnotised. He has to tear his eyes away, to read from his scroll:

"Welcome to the Hippocrene spring, home of inspiration, seat of genius. This water is the traditional source of brilliant ideas, artistic masterpieces, virtuoso performances. You don't have to be a superstar to drink here, though. Art teachers and therapists are equally filled with the divine gift of creativity; even the critic may sip from the same cup as the artiste he reviews."

I wish I could say the spring were horseshoe-shaped, as its name implies; but the start of the talent-fount, the heart of the opening, is hidden by a frill of ferns, hushed by the rushes. The thought of water trickling out of rocks, liquid out of solid, is getting my creative juices flowing. And as for drinking it, I think the Hippocrene spring won't taste like horse-piss, when it passes my lips.

"Ladies, whether you be poet or painter, singer or dancer, please approach the spring. That's just the names on the list," Hypnos insists. "No changing your minds at the last minute. I'll be back to collect you at sundown."

There were only eight names of proper people mentioned, and nine Muses, but as they step out of their circle one-by-one to take each of us by the hands we match up. Nine pairs. Somebody must have changed their mind after all. Hypnos is striding off into the scented bushes, his toga snagging on branches to reveal legs that are neither quite male nor female, but something in between.

"Next stop Hephaestus, the blacksmith god," he says. "Brace yourselves; he's an ugly bastard."

But why should the whole family be beautiful when it's relative? If none of the gods were ugly, we could never be sure that they all weren't. However, if I hadn't seen any mythical beings but the nine Muses of Mount Helicon, I'm sure I would call theirs objective beauty. Every hair on their heads, every thread of the figure-clinging shifts they wear, each facet of their faces channels the light.

My particular Muse is Polyhymnia. I guess it's the religious connection; the shared interest in sacred songs. She comes towards me like it's a meditation; like she may be thinking, am I coming towards her, or is she just getting bigger?

On either side of me, Juno and Hazel are met by Calliope and Terpsichore. How can we tell who is who? Partly due to their props, to their personality, and to the fact that when our hands touch theirs we feel their form, their imaginative features. With Polyhymnia it's a burst of the Hallelujah Chorus, but I can also sense, through Hazel, the pirouette of Margot Fonteyn; through Juno, the Eureka of Archimedes.

That is not a translation. Those actual moments were inspired by these Muses. We may be meeting them in our dream, but they have appeared in the dreams of humanity; and the waking visions and repressed fantasies of Earth's artists too. Their influence is literally universal. Your great novelists, master playwrights, dreaming the philosophy of heaven and earth, are touched by the tongue of the same supernatural storytellers.

We encounter the highs and lows of culture halfway up this mountain; Madge and Mavis Kennedy are with the Muses of Comedy and Tragedy. Thalia is strapping a giant leather phallus to one sister, teaching her all the swear words under the sun; Melpomene is giving the other sister a goat mask, and a script of bleating. They're all in tears, of happiness or sadness; making pictures out of their inexplicable feelings, plots out of their unspoken emotions. In the ritualistic movement taught by the Muses, the Kennedy sisters reconnect with the facts of fiction.

Ma Kennedy shocks everyone, though. She is working with Erato, and the theme is lyrical. Together they are producing love-poetry, love-songs, smoochy dances and scenarios of pure romance. And again, for the sake of the spectrum, pornography creeps in. There has to be ugliness, to know beauty. Lust, to know love. But it's a silken line they dance along, between the two extremes of seduction. Sometimes on one side of an unspoken agreement, sometimes on the other, they swing their hips.

Beyond them, my friends from the singalo day centre, Necky and Kneena are engaged with Clio and Urania; one pair writing history and one pair foretelling the future. Heroic tales of all the kings there's ever been; foolhardy predictions of who will rule the world of sci-fi. The ghost of Hamlet's father; Davros, King of the Daleks; I, Claudius; I, Robot; the fantasy is reality when the Muses sing. This particular pair, astrological and historical, produce an autobiography of time and

space that needs no translation. This close to the spring everyone speaks with one tongue.

The ninth pair are Euterpe, goddess of music and... goodness; the singalo girl! How did she get here?

"Look!" I say to Juno and Hazel. "The Pink Pantheon is gatecrashing our pagan party. Singalos are not supposed to appear in a proper person's dream."

"Well, they seem to be making a habit of it lately," tuts Hazel. "Remember you met Sighman in the cellar at that house party?"

"And in the swimming pool at the barbeque," adds Juno. "It's you, Angela. You're encouraging them."

Am I? It certainly seems to make our dreams extra surreal. I look again at Euterpe and Euterpe, making the music of a twin flute blown with one breath; both playing the same note for double impact, or harmonising for sheer delight. The feeling it gives me is almost too good. Am I getting addicted to this?

"You must be," Hazel agrees. "But I still want to know how they get here."

"Sighman was just an hallucination," I say. "In the cellar, in the pool, it was only me who saw him. You didn't till we woke up. But everyone can see that bloody pink person, right?"

Yes, she is definitely part of the group, as nine of us and nine of them dance together round the sacred spring. Stars are born in the circle we make; the Coliseum, the Globe theatre, the Cirque du Soleil, a shape designed to amplify messages from the Muses. Your original circular performance space, with the best acoustics and lines of sight, was Stonehenge. 'Backstage' wasn't needed till art became illusion and truth had to be hidden behind the scenes. Theatre in the round was still half ritual, half real life. In ancient stone, gaily-striped canvas, or half-timbered and thatched; the circle we dance in, the temple to the Muses, physically grows around us like my own church does back home.

Inspired by the sacred verse of Polyhymnia; I sing a new song to my gods. And as we all make our way towards the horseshoe-shaped spring I approach the highest altar yet, the most sacred font. Not horse-piss, but the pee of Lee, the tears of Sheela: Her spit and His sweat. No worse than drinking the blood of your saviour. No better than the holiest communion. It may give artists ideas, put thoughts into the minds of writers, but for me it cleanses.

Others turn it into a comedy or a tragedy; Juno is telling it as a long monologue, Hazel explores it through the medium of dance. Accompanying us all, Euterpe plays the music; part canon, part can-can. It spins us round and seems to shower us in droplets of spring water. The poet speaks louder, the comedian laughs harder, the dancer steps faster; Ma Kennedy is in an erotic frenzy, about to rip the last shreds of see-through fabric from her body.

"Holy smoke!" I shout. "This is getting out of hand."

Slowly, they stop. Panting, they pause. Perspiration glistening on their faces; splashes of the Hippocrene spring.

"Don't worry, Angela," they smile at me. "It's just a dream."

"It's just a dream for us," I say, "but some people have to live here."

As I speak, Hypnos appears below us on the bushy mountain slope. Is that the time already? We swung the circus sun so violently it's setting now. Dazed in the dying rays, we see the Kennedys, the Smiths, the Bonifaces, back from their mythical day trips. Some of them are covered in the dust of this old rose city; most have the mud of ages caked on their sandals.

The weary hotelier leads the group up the mountain to meet us. Ma Kennedy quickly adjusts her silk negligee, Juno rolls a papyrus scroll closed with a snap, Madge yanks the comedy leather phallus off. Everyone has a souvenir from their Muses, except me; I'm empty-handed but my ears are ringing with the sacred songs. When Polyhymnia kisses me on both cheeks it seems to leave heart-shapes of celestial spring water that I believe will stay moist forever.

As we shyly rejoin friends and family, all looking each other up and down to try and gauge by those invisible watermarks how much we have changed today, my stomach starts to rumble. Not thirsty, but hungry now, the muse-lovers ask the others; "did you get lunch?" As we wander tiredly downhill, the catering details of people's day trips are told; the Bonifaces were given a feast of fire and ice at the table of Zeus, Ray Kennedy and all the boys who chose to see Athena were offered salty nibbles. Demeter had a cup of ambrosia that she passed around as the group sat in Elysian meadows. These titbits whet everybody's appetites; and we demand with one voice for Hypnos to take us to a restaurant.

"Ancient or modern?" he asks, exactly as before.

We say modern, with one voice, no conferring. Had enough of history; overdosed on origins. Hypnos nods, and from a fold in his toga pulls what you would swear were a pair of sunglasses and an ipod.

Wrapping the shades around his black eyes, and sliding the ear pieces under his lank hair, our tour-guide walks down the mountain. His style is different, but the way he takes us is exactly the same as before. We follow him along a now familiar road, terracotta-tiled in the late afternoon sunlight. I look again at houses that seem permanently shuttered, dusty geraniums in cracked pots on their windowsills, and realise that we haven't seen another proper person since we arrived in this old city.

And exactly as before, Hypnos seats us on the same high veranda to overlook the view; with the same shattered mosaic at our feet and the same crumbling pillars, marbled by the ghost of some long dead vine.

"You'd think there was only one restaurant in this town," grumbles Juvenal Boniface, the oldest male member of our party, as our unblinking host gets everybody seated on the worn chairs. "What's modern about it?"

"Ladies and Gentlemen," sighs the hotelier, "meet your hostess; Mrs Myth."

It looks like the same taverna doorway, but Mrs Myth comes through a different curtain. Not the amber-clinking, pottery-clunking one hung there earlier; hers is strung with coke-cans, crisp packets, sweet wrappers. Psychedelic lettering on metallic packaging is what glints and tinkles as the modern hostess appears. Beer bottles and tobacco tins clash, as the first lady of the establishment comes through.

She is enormously fat with greasy black hair sculpted to a point and colourful wires, such as you might find inside an electric plug, piped into the ice-cream up-swirl of her coiffure. Over her vast stomach is spread a cook's apron; the white splashed with Mondrian shapes and colours. She comes with the flapping of flip-flops in neon plastic.

"What you want?"

"I think I'd like a drink to start with," smiles Ray Kennedy. "It's still early. Have you got that stuff we had yesterday?"

Mrs Myth shakes her head, releasing beads of perspiration from the dark hairs on her upper lip.

“No fermented goat milk?”

“Goat milk not good for you,” Mrs Myth shrugs her huge shoulders and the flesh ripples all the way down to her knees. “Is unpasteurised.”

“Well, it was fine last night,” Ray says.

“That in the past,” the hostess gives him a playful pat with her gigantic hand. “I got bio-goat.”

“What in the names of Lee and Sheela is that?” Ray Kennedy doesn’t often get cross, so he uses very old-fashioned curses. It could take years for the name of the third god to make it into his swearing.

“Is pre-biotic. Is low-cal. Is high in poly-unsaturates.”

“Is alcoholic?” Ray is always quick to pick up on native speech patterns though.

“Low-alcohol,” Mrs Myth starts to walk away, “but I got enough to get you drunk. Hypnos, come!”

Before they go, Madge Kennedy and I ask for something non-alcoholic.

“Biogoat-lite,” nods the manageress. “No get drunk in a million years.”

After the thoroughbred qualities of the Hippocrene spring, a mangy goat juice doesn’t sound very appetising, but the hotelier comes back out of the restaurant kitchen with a tray of glasses, toga spattered with dairy-cool shades.

“Doesn't this place have any waitresses?” whispers one of the Kennedy boys, Pall, who’s particularly fond of young ladies.

The hotelier lays a glass on his table and fills it with friendly bacteria.

“There will be entertainment later, sir,” he says stiffly.

“Less chat,” Mrs Myth says, from over his shoulder, “more recite the menu. You want hear tonight’s special?”

“Thank god its not goat,” says Ray.

“Is goat,” says the hostess. “Medallions of goat with wilted oregano and torn basil. Oh, and I got a mountain of potatoes.”

“How are they cooked?” asks Ma Kennedy, hungry after the erotic dancing.

“Mountain-style,” says Mrs Myth. “They just is.”

The bio-goat is having a funny effect on the group; that and the sun setting in an intoxicating trickle between the mountain peaks and rooftops of the exotic scene.

People of lofty social standing are making low jokes; great intellects are engaging in mindless speculation.

"Hephaestus," says Do Kennedy, who met him while her sister was with the Muses, "has helpers made of gold. Beautiful handmaids who can walk and talk and do everything he tells them, fashioned from the molten metal of his own forge."

"They sound hot!" cheers Pall.

"He only uses them to do the cleaning, dear," says Do.

Bored with the talk I get up and wander across the cracked patio to the kitchen door; a doorless doorway, permanently open. I go down a stone step. In the dim kitchen, the hotelier is labouring alone over a slow roasting goat and a very small flame. In the other hand, he is holding a non-alcoholic drink.

"I thought your cooking methods might be more modern tonight," I say. My pregnant voice couldn't manage a word like microwave, but that's the kind of thing I'm thinking. Hypnos can't read my mind, though; his black eyes are full of the blood of hand-killed, hand-cooked goat.

"What could be more modern than fire?" he asks, turning the handle.

"Mrs Myth should know."

"Her!" tuts Hypnos. "She's just Mr Myth standing on his head. Toga turned upside down to make an apron, his brawny arms turned into her lardy legs. Neither of them do any work, though."

"So why can't you get someone else to help you?"

"There isn't anybody else," he says. "Haven't you noticed?"

I have, but in my non-received pronunciation didn't like to say. And given all the gods and goddesses we were introduced to, it hardly seemed to matter that one guy was doing all the menial work. Maybe there are other dreams where the gods don't rule; with deserted temples, derelict churches to a dead idea. Maybe there are other dreams where this taverna would be busy. But the house-fronts in every street here tell of its society, their windows truly empty; nobody is in, so nobody goes out. Suddenly our tour guide's perspective looks unbearably lonely.

"So, do you get many holidaymakers?" I ask, trying to lighten up. "Many dreamers like us passing through?"

"There are all manner of ghosts," the hotelier replies.

Goat juices drip onto the fire, making it hiss and spit. Outside I can hear the animal roar of my family and friends, behaving completely out of character. Hypnos downs his bio-goat in one, tosses the cup in the sink and heaves the roast meat off the red-hot spike. There's a sizzle as his leg hairs get too close to the flames, but he doesn't flinch. He holds the stiff carcass in a clumsy embrace.

There is a movement in the doorway behind me. I turn and see Madge Kennedy's pregnant form, silhouetted against the light.

"Crikey, culinary crisis!" she says.

Hypnos hauls the capricorn corpse onto a trolley, though it was meant to be medallions for this meaty hero; slams a lid on and wheels it precariously over the flagstone floor. He pauses in the doorway for a parting shot:

"Come and get it while it's hot."

Outside it is nearly dark. The last colours of the sunset are smearing the sky with apricot coulis, and Mrs Myth is lighting the candles on the tables. The air is full of the breeze that gets up as the sun goes down, and the smell of cooling earth. As our waiter lifts the lid off the goat, its wood-smokiness mingles with the fresh mountain herbs.

Just like the previous evening, we take aeons over the food and drink. Just like the previous evening, our hotelier performs a belly-dance, with no more enjoyment than if he were being martyred at the stake. And then, just like the previous evening, he disappears into the kitchen to single-handedly do the washing up.

Day is breaking before the last plate is stacked, the last glass is shining, and the last bowl of dirty water is poured over the geraniums outside the back door. Yawning, Hypnos appears on the patio in front where our party have been drinking bio-goat all night. Ray Kennedy said we wouldn't need to sleep, because this is already a dream; but passing out from excess low-alcohol is a possibility. It is a slobbering line-up that kisses our hostess on both cheeks and a slow and delicate procession that follows Hypnos down the hill to the hotel.

On the way one of Madge's young cousins is sick. He throws a stomachful of goat food and drink violently over the cobblestones. I've never seen anyone being sick before. It only happens on certain holidays, say eighteen out of thirty.

"Now that," says my sister, watching the technicolour splash and the pattern spread, "is fine art."

Everyone else is tight-lipped, in case the sickness is catching. When we get back to the hotel, several people say they're going for a lie down. Hazel has other ideas though. She tugs me by the dream sleeve.

"I'm going to do some painting," she says. "Pall Kennedy's improvisation has really inspired me. I'm going to try and create a splat like his, with egg tempura."

She rushes upstairs, overtaking the slower-moving members of our party, still holding my hand.

"Come on," she insists, "it'll be abstract."

We run down the attic corridor and into our room, where we stop dead.

"Oh no," I gasp.

The strange new stealing thing has happened to Hazel's stuff. Her beautiful paints and pristine sheets of white paper are smeared and scattered all over the walls and floor of the room. The colour-pots of her creative skill have been fingered by a thief. I try to comfort her, but in this dream state all I can do is clumsily put my arms round her. We are still standing there in shock, when Juno comes through the doorway behind us.

"Oh Mum," Hazel cries. "My stuff has been stolen."

The other four families come into our room to help clear up. Sheaves of paper are restacked, pools of paint encouraged back into pots that seem only slightly less full than before.

"Is anything actually missing?" asks Ray Kennedy, gently.

"I don't think so," says Hazel, staring at the wall. "But something extra has appeared."

We all turn to look in the direction of her gaze. On the sloping wall beneath the attic ceiling some graffiti has been daubed in gold paint.

"Right, that does it," Mum says firmly, "I'm getting Hypnos up here. He has some explaining to do."

"I'm here already," comes a small voice from the back of the crowd, and the hotelier shuffles apologetically into view.

"How do you account for these break-ins and burglaries?" Juno asks. "Holiday accommodation needs to be high-security."

"I told you," he says plaintively, "its ghosts."

"Ghosts?" gasps everyone.

"Why did you put us up here, then?" asks Do Kennedy.

"Well, you're sort of like ghosts too," Hypnos falters.

"We're holiday makers," says Ray, "dreamers on an official package trip. We stick together, and don't go anywhere we're not supposed to. What you're talking about sounds like lost souls."

"They're easy enough to deal with," says the head social worker. "We come across them a lot, around the distressed singalos. If you like, I can get rid of them for you."

"How?" says Hypnos.

"By holding a séance," says the Head. "We do it all the time at the day centre."

"Will it work in a dream?" asks Juno.

"We'll see, won't we," says the Head, matter-of-factly. She wears her mysticism as comfortably as a knitted cardigan. "But let's wait till nightfall. It'll be more effective in the dark."

The group split up to spend the day in individual pursuits. Thanks to everyone's help, Hazel's paint box and brushes look as good as new, and her spirit isn't smudged. She is a mistress of metamorphoses, of transforming bad into good. Ultimately it is only the vandal who will be damaged by their act.

A few of us linger in the hotel room, trying to make sense of the markings on the wall; me, Hazel, a couple of Kennedy boys, Horace from the Boniface family who works in what you might call advertising. All of us slightly off-the-wall in our fascination with art. Eventually, Pall Kennedy, still a bit drunk, says, "Look at it this way. That's the head. These are arms and legs, and this is an umbilical cord."

"Can't be," says Horace. "It's not attached to anything."

Hazel traces the loose end with her finger. It culminates in a clumsy knot.

"We can't leave it like this," she tuts, and hands out paintbrushes to everybody there. No proper person, however eccentric, wants to see someone left out of the fold. The gold cord is soon interwoven with others in shades of yellow and orange and red as we each draw a picture of ourselves on the wall around the graffiti artist. None of us have ever tried to portray the proper form in paint before, and the results are not entirely successful.

"I'm sure my head isn't really this shape," mutters Hazel, her tongue stuck out in concentration.

"It isn't any shape, don't worry about it," says tall Pall Kennedy, experimenting happily with the length of his limbs.

"How many fingers have I got?" Hazel holds them up to her face.

"You don't have to get the exact number," says Horace Boniface, gaily giving himself digits in burnt sienna, left right and centre.

The sole gold being soon belongs to a family network of mythical proportions; the cord that was a loose end now woven into the warp and weft of society's fabric. We leave it to dry and go off, stained yellow and orange up to the elbows, burnished red to the knees, to find the rest of our real families among the trees and columns of this dream world.

At sundown everyone returns to the hotel where, after a quick wash and brush-up in the bronze-age bathrooms, we reassemble in the attic corridor outside mine and Hazel's room.

I've been to séances before. It's part of a priestess's training; sometimes one has to contact dead people and those living in different dimensions. My mother and sister have also seen a few at the singalo centre; but many of the Kennedys and most of the Bonifaces have never witnessed one.

They shouldn't be afraid. The word 'medium' in your language also works in ours; in this role the head social worker is at her most average, completely ordinary. She invites us into the bare attic bedroom, taking care to stand the tall ones where the walls are highest, getting the youngsters to sit cross-legged under the eaves. Then she kneels down stiffly where a shaft of moonlight shines diagonally onto the floor.

As we watch, a shower of flowers, white geranium petals, falls from nowhere onto the Head's shoulders.

"No need to ask if there's anybody there, then," she smiles. "Okay sweetheart, are you going to show yourself?"

There is silence. Nothing but ancient dust moves in the spotlight.

"We've got a shy one here," the Head says to us; and then in a playful, motherly tone, "Come out, come out, whoever you are."

Still no one materialises.

"Look, love, I know you're embarrassed," says the medium kindly, "but there's really no need to be. Plenty of souls get lost; it's nothing to be ashamed of. Heavens, it's not as if there are signposts!"

We all giggle warmly, and there is another giggle, indistinguishable from the rest of them except that it makes the Head's mystic antennae prick up instantly.

"A disembodied voice," she gasps. As the rest of us stop laughing, she whispers; "Darling, it's not a good look. You are among friends. Let's reveal that body."

In the shaft of moonlight, an outline appears. As ambiguous at first as its self-image painted on the wall; rough head, vague arms and legs, barely credible cord leading nowhere. As the shape fills out it becomes clear that the poltergeist is not just among friends but family too.

"Oh!" shouts Mrs Smith. "It's Evadne!"

Her daughter, the one whose story we translated for you earlier; the one who got left behind in the dream house when everybody else had gone home. A teenager whose body has now withered on the cord, still attached to her mother, to the size of a Sindy Doll.

"Evadne?" cries her mother, looking from the tiny relic to the life size replica of her dear daughter. "I've missed you so much!"

We're all pleased to see the troublesome soul, but no one dares move away from the walls for fear of breaking the spell in which she's found.

"Where have you been?" says her mother, with tears in her eyes.

"Where you always said I was," replies Eva cheekily. "Lost in a dream."

"How long have you languished here?" asks the hotelier, leaning by the open door.

"Let's just say, I got here before that package trip of night sailors took over the top floor for a fortnight," says Eva.

"You behaved very badly," Hypnos replies.

"I behaved badly?" says Eva. "They were none of them angels."

There is almost an expression on the hotelier's face, almost a smile.

"I had to re-grout the bathrooms after that," he said.

"I know," replied the mischievous spirit, "I watched."

Her mother lets a little tut-tut escape the lips that have longed to kiss Evadne's living skin.

"She's just as bad in this life as the other," Mrs Smith's sigh stirs the white geranium petals in the social worker's hair.

As a medium, the Head has two choices now. She can pat Evadne on the shoulder and send her peacefully to dreamland, or she can pull her bodily back to the real world by that rusty umbilical cord and reattach her to the Smiths.

As a social worker, she lets people make their own choices. Eva's proper body is badly decomposed, but if her heart were in it, a full recovery could be achieved. A dead flower is never irredeemable until it's fallen off the family tree and this one is clinging on. Sometimes a good pruning is better for all concerned though.

"Eve," intones the Head, her face in shadow now the moon's beam has moved on, "the decision is yours. We can take you back to real life or leave you here to dream."

The pause speaks. The girl's brief silence says it all. The hotelier she's been haunting smiles. The mother who had already lost her sobs. The busy real world barely notices the moment pass. For the lonely land of dreams it is momentous.

"Could I be visible here, though?" Evadne asks the social worker politely.

The Head brushes ghost petals briskly out of her lap.

"I'll see what I can do, dear," she says.

Things move quickly after this. Like all good trips the first few days last forever, but speed up as the end of the holiday approaches; and in something of a whirlwind, on the last day of our vacation, Hypnos and Evadne are married.

If they are to be stuck in this quiet resort for eternity, at least they can live happily ever after; in a new house amidst the crumbling ruins. Maybe the interminable sunrise and sunset won't be so tedious if they watch it together; maybe the gods and goddesses won't be the only ones having a sublime time.

Hypnos and Evadne have fallen head over heels in love. They have so much in common; both lost in a dream, really. When two people who get out of bed on the wrong side meet, something must be right.

Eve says she's fancied Hypnos for ages, and was lingering wistfully in the attic in the hope that he would eventually notice her. He says if that was lingering, he'd hate to see her lurking.

They decide that it will be a good omen to have two heavily pregnant bridesmaids, so Madge Kennedy and I lumber down the road ahead of them as

they walk to church, scattering pink geranium petals in their path. It's early in the morning and the blooms are fresh and dewy.

Hypnos didn't collect them all by himself; everybody helped. We are making a floral procession to the temple of Aphrodite. It's higher up the mountain than Hermes, than Hephaestus, than the Muses. The air itself is high. I throw a handful of petals over the bride and groom distractedly. My main worry is that I might have to make a speech in a funny voice.

Hypnos and Evadne have written their own vows, there being no tradition of wedding ceremonies in this uncharted territory. He starts by asking her an elementary question.

"In the fight between fire and ice who wins?" he says.

"Water," she replies.

Then they trickle through the gates of the temple of Aphrodite. The giant, twin-domed building, painted gold, is brilliant in the morning sun. We follow and are dwarfed by it; our flower-waving parade, headed by the jumbo-sized Mr and Mrs Myth is like a pouring of ants around the body of a woman lying in the grass.

The entrance is, as all temple doors are, the opening to her womb. Once inside, well I suppose it translates as a giant pink bouncy castle, the rubber smell tempered with heady perfume, popular love songs pumped into the air. Our procession wobbles its way to the altar.

Meeting Aphrodite herself is something that changes a person forever; even a proper person, even if they're only dreaming. Just being at the wedding makes everybody there feel married to their own inner goddess of beauty and fertility. A spiritual makeover that no one got from the blacksmith god, Hephaestus; with a special message that no one got from the messenger god, Hermes. All the other gods and goddesses are present too, to hear Hypnos and Evadne exchange their vows, at Aphrodite's heart-shaped altar:

"I promise to shower you with affection and watch your flowers grow."

"I promise to strike you with lightning when your batteries run low."

"I promise to blow away your dark clouds with a kiss."

"I promise to be a pool of bliss..."

"I promise to jump into you at least once a week," rushes Hypnos, "I'll dive deeper than you thought anybody could go. Then I'll climb out and lie beside you,

letting your wetness dry on my skin, till you are once again still and clear enough to contemplate my reflection in.”

“Really romantic!” says Madge Kennedy, quietly.

“It reminds me,” whispers Hazel in my other ear, “of that scene from your mating game, where you were a sunny river bank and Sighman was a crystal stream.”

“Sshhh!” I say. I’m engrossed in the ceremony and gripped by Venus-envy. Having performed fertility rites myself, it is fascinating to see how the mythical deity does it. Wishing I’d thought of the pink champagne and raw oyster eucharist, I solemnly queue to take communion. We kneel in a row at the purple-veined rail and the goddess offers each of us in turn the food and drink of love. No one looks up at her, until she comes to me. Full of professional, and personal, curiosity I break the rule.

Mr Myth made it very plain on our first night here. Don’t try to look the gods and goddesses in the eye. But in our real religion that is the ultimate aim; to see the faces of Lee and Sheela and the third god, whose name may soon be known. That is the purpose of spiritual development, to hold the gods’ gaze. I guess I wouldn’t be a priestess if my urge were not to look up as Aphrodite passes me, to behold her face as well as her feet.

That spoils it. She is beautiful, but she is looking down on me. She is perfect, except that she doesn’t love me. I feel like a fan who has queued all night to see my favourite star walk down the red carpet, and got within speaking distance of the person I worship, only to realise how far apart we really are. I know intimate details about her; she doesn’t even notice me in the huge, anonymous crowd.

Give me a god I can’t see, any day; the still, small voice that at least seems to know my name. As we return to our pews for the final prayers, I take pleasure in sitting on a cushioned kneeler that is embroidered, as they all are, with her immaculate face.

Aphrodite does not appear at the wedding party afterwards, on the lawn outside her temple. Every other creature on the mountain has galloped through the fancy gates and fauns, satyrs and minotaurs frolic with the real and god-like hoofers as the dance gets into its stride.

Coloured ribbons are fluttering everywhere, on people's skirts and in their hair, on the makeshift marquee and the bridles of mythical beasts; all plaiting together in complex patterns to make the whole scene a giant maypole dance around Priapus, the god with the giant pole.

The food leaves something to be desired, though Hypnos has honed his cooking to prepare a skilful meal for the wedding feast. Two separate goats have been smoked and thinly sliced, then baked in alternate layers to become a 'terrine of two into one', signifying the interleaving of flavours, the interweaving of identities that is marriage.

Goblets of alcoholic goat-milk are raised and speeches are made. Mr Myth goes first, promising that now Hypnos is a married man he won't have to do all the washing-up himself. Mrs Myth adds that the two of them will try harder to bring the ancient and modern sides of the city together, forging a better future. Then Hypnos, flanked by his best men Hermes and Hephaestus, in top hats and togas, announces that he has achieved the status of an Olympic god today; and that his marital bed will shortly be installed in a newly-built temple of sleep.

On behalf of the blushing bride, Mr and Mrs Smith also give speeches; and though embarrassed to speak in pregnant accents, I am finally called upon to bless the couple in the name of Evadne's official faith. Despite the permanence of their own union, Lee and Sheela don't get much call to do weddings; and so, there are mating messages and pregnancy prayers, but no marriage blessings, as such.

Uninspired by bio-goat lite, disillusioned by the vision of Aphrodite, I raise my arms in what starts as a shrug but ends as a star-jump, and say: hip-hip-hooray! Hip for Him, Hip for Her, Hooray for the un-named third god whom we hope won't be for much longer. Some of the Muses don't look impressed by my clumsy invocation; but Polyhymnia gives me a thumbs-up when the others aren't looking.

Then Ray Kennedy asks if Hypnos and Evadne are going away on honeymoon. There is much ribald laughter as the hotelier answers the question with another wink.

"As my wife and I are unable to leave this dream-bound valley, the only way we could possibly have a honeymoon is if you lot would wake up and go home!"

So the holiday ends with the wedding breakfast. We gather up our belongings as the marquee comes down, and say our goodbyes to the happy couple. Mrs Smith gives her daughter a long hug; Evadne is visible from all angles now. As they separate, the shed skin of her former self falls from her mother's umbilical cord. Under the bride's foot, it is quickly ground into dream dust.

It's the hottest time of the day for a climb to the top of the mountain. Everyone's sandals rub uncomfortably and the luggage seems heavier than before. Luckily it is not long before we start to feel sleepy, or the identical sensation that means we're about to wake up.

One by one we sink to the dirt track, dizzy and disorientated. We land on the ground with loud snores. Just below the summit, there is spinning and stillness as reality shifts around us and within us. In individual blackness we grope for the peak, the point between two realms that never meet.

Waking up from a holiday dream is like having jet lag with a hangover on top. I give an ungodly groan, and clutch my temples.

"Och, ma heid!" I say.

Next to me, Madge Kennedy winces.

"Painful places proliferate," she replies.

As we get to our feet with our respective families and brush ourselves off, the last sands of a good time fall from the crumples and creases of our dream clothing. The leather straps of shoes and bags have been replaced by the infinitely stouter cords that join us to mothers and sisters once more. Our holiday bodies are put away like empty suitcases till next year.

Suddenly, a hellebore leaf with its nine black fingers falls out of the bottom of mine; a souvenir of the Muses. It reminds me of the singalo girl who I haven't seen since we came down from Mount Helicon. I hope Euterpe managed to make her own way back home.

*

Holidays, like dreams, can be approached from several directions. People converge on them from here, there and everywhere. So the Muses can inspire

stories in several dimensions. That same nine, whose temple is the ring of bare feet with a dome of flowing hair, sing the words while people sleep, in the real world and in yours. Euterpe, the muse who sometimes plays a twin flute, tells her secrets equally to angels like us and ordinary writers at the flat screen of humanity. But Alison maintains an amateur shrine to them, while I meet them at the altar of my profession.

The first morning back at church after the holidays is always a come down, and it is with a sinking feeling that Juno, Hazel and I fly to matins. I am heavily pregnant and they struggle to keep me in the air. When the service begins, they have to bend to light the candles for me; if I knelt down, I'd never get up again. I chant the liturgy silently, in my head. If I spoke them out loud the words would sound ridiculous. Actually, the words sound pretty ridiculous in ma heid.

But the chanting takes me back up the mountain, each syllable a yearning step back to the scene of our recent mini-break. I sing a hallowed path through the prickly herbs to the silence of the ruined city. Not easily fallen, it was cast in rose stone and pillared on all sides by gods; but the girl we call the pink pantheon was admitted. A singalo, again, in our dream.

I'm not proud of the way I behaved there; pretending not to see her. Of all the pagan characters, I behaved least like a priestess. My chanting is apologetic; *mea culpa* in the pulpit. Out of my grovelling inner song, the actual embodiment of the person I'm thinking about grows; not walking but wafting up the aisle she couldn't even crawl in previous scenes. Europa suddenly appears; out of our dreams and into my church, she almost seems to fly.

When my premonition of her prophesy comes to pass it happens so suddenly. The singalo girl doesn't falter at the altar, coming past the red rope that's meant to keep lay people at bay, reaching the great, golden-winged lectern that even I have to stand on tip-toe to see. It might look like I turn a page of the good book, but there are no words written for what happens next; it is all in the oral tradition.

"I want to tell you the name of the third god," says Europa.

"Yes," I say, "I want you to, too."

She leans towards me with the sound of a whistling bullet, which makes it difficult to hear.

"It's you," she whispers.

"Me?" I shout.

"You," she whispers.

"I'm the daughter of Lee and Sheela?" I shout.

"You are the godchild," she whispers.

Then she pops like a bubble of celestial saliva. For a moment I just stand on the altar steps, drooling. I am the child of god?

"Mum, Hazel, guess what?" I shake them out of their trances from the inside.

They come round slowly, still sleepy from the recent dream.

"I've had an annunciation," I say.

It's not a word they've come across in daily life; and my nearly nine-month pregnant accent makes it harder to understand. So I replay my memory of the event and watch it again with them. I have to laugh at the sight of myself praying till I fracture with rapture and appear many times in the fly's-eye of my mind; head bent, hands steepled.

"You were really buzzing," says Hazel.

"Shhh," I say, "this is the bit."

But there's only a burst of feedback on the tape; and when the normal picture is resumed, I'm shaking her and Mum awake, saying that there's been an annunciation. Looks like it hasn't recorded, but it all happened so fast. Maybe my memory just didn't pick it up.

"Rewind it and try again," Juno says. "Let's watch it frame by frame."

Now we see it. The girl appears between the first pair of pillars, solidifying out of the pink mist of my prayers, till her singalo features are fixed in red clay. We hear me gasp, out of shot.

"I want to tell you the name of the third god," Europa says.

And this is when the white noise starts, a screaming assault on the ears that is just as painful to remember as it was in real time.

"Can't you turn that down a bit?" says Juno.

"I'm going to whisper it," says the singalo girl. She moves out of my line of vision towards my ear; so all we can see is the church interior, the picture guttering like a candle flame.

"It's you."

"Me?"

"You," she whispers.

"I'm the daughter of Lee and Sheela?" I shout.

"You are the godchild." It is faithfully recorded.

"You?" says Juno.

"The name of the third god is Angela?" says Hazel.

"My little girl?" says Juno.

"It can't be," says Hazel. "I'm sorry, sis. I love you to death, but I don't think you're god."

They miss the pink pantheon's abrupt disappearance. As she goes, the screeching sound goes with her, but some of the sparkle is lost from the picture too. It's hard to imagine how a cardboard singalo could look so animated; how her stringy movements had me dangling from her every word. But one word moved me more than all the others. She said Angela.

We follow her home. It's time for Hazel to go to work at the day centre, anyway. The art therapy group are waiting in a circle, humming cacophonously like an orchestra warming up.

My eyes scan the crowd. Sighman is there, but I'm looking for the singalo girl. I imagine her having only just made it, the overland journey much slower than our flight. I picture her plasticene features glistening with sweat, as she tries to keep her cool when our gazes meet. But she's not there. My eyes scan the room again, brushing past Sighman, who tries to catch them in his green stare; but my illusory orbs are not easy to snare.

The session starts, and I feel uncomfortable from the word go. The yellow gives me what you would call acid indigestion, and turns quickly to a sulphurous orange, then an ulcerous red. Suddenly, there are agitated shouts from the audience. We open our eyes to find Sighman staging a coup.

"Are you ever going to let anyone else sing?" he says.

Hazel is surprised, but responds calmly.

"Is there something you'd like to share with us?" she asks.

"Yes," he replies, glaring at me. "It's a protest song!"

You have so little time for me

I'll keep my message brief:

Angel, our love is giving me
Nothing but grief.

But what Sighman still doesn't realise is that a proper person rarely has a relationship with the father of her child. For example, I happen to know that Madge Kennedy has hardly seen Willyum Windsaw since he made her pregnant; and this is entirely normal.

"Someone ought to tell him," says Hazel telepathically.

"Och noo, do I have to?" I cringe.

"Of course, darling," Mum says. "It's only fair."

One commanding glance and he comes hither.

"Hi," I gulp.

"Hi," he replies.

"That was a nice song," I say, "but the lyrics were nae very realistic. Proper people don't hang oot with the fathers of their bairns. The visiting arrangements get too tricky when big families are involved; so we just stick wi' our ain wee'uns."

"But I'm single," says Sighman. "I can come and go as I please."

"There's really no need," I smile.

Sighman gives me a long green look.

"So now you're pregnant," he says, "you don't want to know me any more."

The rest of his kind are beginning to crowd round us, keen to continue with the colour therapy.

"We want to do blue," Surely is saying. "Next time, let's go all the way."

"We can't," sighs Hazel. "Blue isn't for the likes of us."

The lady who couldn't speak has become the singalo's ringleader. "We want blue," she gets them all chanting, "we want blue!"

"No, Surely, we'll never make it," Hazel shakes her head.

"But that's what they said about our jumpers," insists Surely. "They said we'd never finish our knitting, didn't they girls?"

Her friends nod, hot but proud in their knotty sweaters.

"Yes, but only great gurus do blue; religious leaders, people of the highest spiritual standing," says Hazel. "Only the ones who can look Lee and Sheela in the eye. Perhaps we're not good enough."

Surely leans towards us.

"And perhaps you're perfect," she whispers.

A memory like an old black-and-white photograph flashes at me, Juno and Hazel. It was a scene we witnessed, peeping through singalo keyholes to find Sighman; but instead we saw Europa, whispering something in Surely's ear, exactly as she whispered in mine.

"Does this mean," says mum, "that everyone she's spoken to knows Angela is the godchild?"

"I suppose so," Hazel replies telepathically, "but I still can't believe it myself. No offence, Ange."

We leave the singalo centre in a daze, oblivious to the new relaxed atmosphere which allows us to simply float out of there, instead of being escorted off the premises by social workers. We take off effortlessly, clearing the institutional gates with ease on the way to our next appointment; but once in flight, Hazel's voice comes over the intercom.

"Pssst!" she says to me. "This could be your last chance to fly with the eyes open."

"I've given it up."

"Prematurely," she replies, "and when you've given birth it'll be too late. Won't you regret not making the most of life's rakish angles while they're still possible?"

Her argument is persuasive. One last go at flying with eyes open can't hurt, can it?

"What if it does damage to my unborn child?" I ask.

"Don't be hysterical," says Hazel.

By way of a compromise, I open one eye only. The sensations are overwhelming. When proper people fly with eyes closed, we get the impression that we are moving through space; but as soon as we open them we see that space is moving and we are still.

I am suspended, cruciform, high in the atmosphere. I am poised at the permanent crossroads of our journey; the G-spot of our A to Z. Far below me our planet pulses, its molecules flow like rivers through valleys and roads across the plains; while my own blood, such as it is, is frozen in my veins.

I can't resist a glimpse of my sister in this state, for the last time ever. Her splat-look makes me laugh as much as it did the first time I saw it. She glances

back at me and tries to smile, but manages to turn her whole face inside out, cheeks rubberised by the altitude. Although we both appear to be travelling at breakneck speed, we are sharing a profound inner calm. She looks down serenely on our world. I follow her gaze and tut quietly:

"Does that planet ever stop spinning?"

Alighting with the eyes open is downright dangerous. The tendency is to try and see where to land, to make navigational decisions, instead of just letting our destination come to us.

"Close them, girls," urges Juno, "you're pulling us off course."

Hazel's are shut already; she's an eye-flyer now, and has calculated every risk she takes to the split second. But I'm out of practice and mesmerised by the physical approach of the scenery. Imagine yourself jumping from an aeroplane and fumbling fruitlessly with your parachute ripcord as fields and trees grow disastrously larger before your eyes. My mother and sister have to actually enter my mind in order to get my eyes shut: much as your mum might go into your bedroom to pull the curtains while you are out. They have to hold my eyelids down like wayward roller-blinds until we land, deafened by my screaming in their ears.

The ground-rush has a druggy effect. I am hallucinating the landscape, visualising a tropical topography that we cannot possibly come down in. But when I open my eyes again, we are entering the classroom, cool and professional; and the map of the jungle is merely a learning aid, pinned to the wall.

After all this geography, I am glad to learn that today's lesson is biology. "The miracle of birth," says Juno. "You'll be able to give a seminar paper."

"Och aye," I mutter. But I'm not sure how intelligible it'll be with my regional accent. It wasn't so difficult in the dream, as we were in foreign parts anyway; but now we're back at home I seem harder to understand. Perhaps mum can just point at my reproductive organs with her ruler.

Compared to the social awkwardness of pregnancy, giving birth is a party. We call it the Coming-Out Ball.

"So," says Juno to her class, "who's been to a Coming-Out Ball before?" They all have, of course. In such a big family, births are a regular occurrence. "Galatea, can you remember the first time you saw your new cousin?" asks Juno.

"Yes," says the little Greek girl. "A new cord came out of Auntie Diana's tummy."

"What did the cord look like?" asks the teacher.

"It was bright white," Galatea lisps; "brilliant light shone from her as it slipped out. The slithering shape got longer and yellower, then at the orangest end we saw the baby Bion. Just like he looks now, but smaller, with golden snot."

"Thank you dear, that was very clear," says Juno and turns to the small boy. "Tell me, Bion, what can you remember about your birth?"

The boy just chuckles babyishly.

"Tunnel... light... Mama..." he says.

Suddenly, I double up and dip out of my classroom trance, groaning in pain.

"Oh dear," says Juno. Everyone starts to stir. "Are you alright, Angela?"

"She is getting very close to her time," says Hellenic, the old lady of the family.

"Yes," says Juno, "I think it will be any day now. What say you, Angela?"

"Ah'm fit tae burst, Mithar," I reply.

The children are frightened by my strange voice and start to cry.

"Perhaps we ought to leave things there, for today," Mum says.

Now that everyone is coming out of their trances, no one can remember what the class was about. Diana automatically wipes her little boy's snotty nose and smiles absently at Galatea.

It's strange, our education system. No one questions, except the teachers. No one has answers, except the kids. It's a different situation with our religion; I think my parishioners really have doubts.

Gods know how I build my temple that day, shaken to my foundations by full-term pregnancy and babbling in all the tongues under the sun.

The usually smooth pillars are as knotty and twisted as apple tree trunks, and from every crack and crevice maggoty heads head emerge. Bits of masonry fall like ripe fruit from the ceiling, smashing open on the floor of the aisle.

"Can this place last the service?" worries Hazel, as the stone tombs in side chapels start to open with a grinding sound.

"Can Angela?" adds mum.

As the first members of the congregation come through the gnarled wooden doors, my family hustle me into the vestry.

"Hoots mon!" I scream at the top of my pregnant voice.

"Hush," Juno says to me; then to my sister, "Sing hymns. Loudly!"

Hazel marches onward, as to war, into the first verse of something or other. But for me the yellow banners of her Methodist song are too wishy-washy; their orange balm, no matter how liberally applied, cannot relieve my labour-pains. In the final stages of confinement, a proper person's discomfort is only metaphysical; still my red screams could curdle even the most bloodless body.

When my sister's song starts to inject me with purple I feel some relief. Instead of fighting the feeling of impending birth, this colour goes with the flow. The purple seems to pulse at the same rate as the cord moving serpent-like inside me; an uncoiling thing that's almost ready to come out.

"It won't be long now," says Juno, gently.

"Can you face your congregation?" says Hazel.

"Give me one more toke of that purple," I reply.

She gives me so much I start to get high. In another burst of song, the violet is tinged with indigo.

"Oh god, look," Juno says, in a voice of pure helium, as she stares at the aura surrounding us.

"Oh look, god," I say, leaving the vestry in an azure rush.

The Bingens and Bonifaces fall to their knees as we appear at the altar. They remain motionless in their rows, for the duration of the spontaneous sermon I deliver as if with a single breath. I lift my arms ecstatically into the air, with no regard for the weight of my giant breasts, and say:

"All praise to the magnificent pair, the godfather and godmother whose love produced the godchild. All respect to their balance of power, their sharing of responsibilities, their mystic rota of childcare.

"Gentlemen of the congregation, praise the name of Lee, ladies of the congregation, praise the name of Sheela; and join together to sing for the first time the name of the third god, which I can reveal to you exclusively, here, today..."

At this moment the double doors at the back of the church burst open and a quintet of singing messengers in barber-shop stripes appear, panting.

"Yes?" I say abruptly, annoyed by their interruption.

They answer me in harmony;

to the Coming-out Ball!

come

come

Come

come

come

to the Coming-out Ball!

welcome one and all!

family

Kennedy

The

Kennedy

family

welcome one and all!

Then they turn on their heels and dash off the way they came. My congregation get off their knees and follow the singing barbers without a backwards glance at me. Their momentum sweeps me off my feet to join Juno and Hazel in mutual flight down the aisle of my church, with pillars falling around us like dead trees.

"Hey!" I protest, "I've nae finished."

"But Madge's baby is starting," says Juno, and my church crumbles, back to dust in the desert, as we fly away.

On the astral plain of our existence, the Coming-out Ball stands out in sharp relief. We see it rising from the invariable prairie, accompanied by Madge Kennedy's aria:

"Assemble! Assist! Aperture appearing! Abstraction accelerating! Abysmal alliteration arrested anon!"

Most of the guests are wearing masks: you would call them surgical, rather than social, the translator says. They are made of white, light that we save for special occasions like welcoming a proper person into the world. Everyone is dancing attendance on Madge. We can hardly see her face in the crowd, but every so often her feet appear above their heads. There's a general shout: it's coming out!

The smell of childbirth isn't easy to translate but we think it might be disinfectant. We wrinkle our noses as it comes from the opening at the centre of a new mother's being, the sterile door between the dimensions of life and death. There's only room for her close family to dance on its threshold.

Music is made by an orchestra of little silver instruments, tinkling knives and scalpels, a stainless steel kidney bowl to drum the beat and a bleeping machine for the boom of the heart. Louder still, Madge's shrieks echo around the coming-out ballroom. But her cries don't last for long; the abysmal alliteration is arrested anon. Before we know it, she is gibbering "Thank Sheela that's over!" in her normal voice; and starting each word of the sentence with whatever letter she likes.

"Let us see," say Juno and Hazel, lifting up into the air to get their first glimpse of the new born baby on the end of the cord.

"It's a girl!" cheers Ray Kennedy, and the celebrations begin.

Flushed from the delivery, Madge makes a tour of the ballroom; her mother and sister and brothers and uncles all glued to the new arrival. When a child is born to one of your kind, the guests bring gifts; but this baby only wants the love of her mother, the support of her family, and the friendship of the community.

Dance is the way we introduce her to the world; Muse Terpsichore oversees it. As soon as Madge Kennedy's daughter is dangling on the end of the umbilical cord, she is worked into the routine, woven into the pattern as we square dance around her, huge families tangling with the complex steps. As the choreography unfolds, we get a closer look at the child: marvelling at the transparent form of her, in the way that you marvel at tiny fingers and toes; looking into a new soul like you would look into a pair of baby blue eyes.

For a while I forget my own condition, and gaze in wonder at another mother's miracle. There's even a father; William Windsaw leaps out of the crowd,

looking rather proud. But then I become aware again of the incredible bulk that Juno and Hazel are trying to quick step round the dance floor. Me. With a miracle of my own, slowly but surely beginning at somebody else's Coming-Out ball. I groan.

"She's having it here!" Mum tells my sister telepathically.

"One ball, two babies?" gasps Hazel.

They drag me off the dance floor into a quiet corner. I can't speak but there's so much I want to say: hurry me away, I don't want to spoil the Kennedy's big day. My baby is half singalo, it's probably not going to be okay. What dodgy characteristics could be produced by our mating; part angel dust, part sweaty clay.

I wish I'd asked Sighman to be at the birth. I could use his singalo strengths now, his common-sense and scientific know-how. If only he were telepathic I would send an urgent message for him to come. But it must be for the best, if in these final moments of threedom my family hold hands and dance in a circle one last time. It'll be square dancing next: let's sing *omne trinum est perfectum* while we may.

But all I can do is shout Scottish obscenities. Other families are donning their masks again, and flying towards me to help; and I try to say go back to Madge, my best friend who'll cry if I upstage her at her own ball, but all I can manage is a stream of highland swearing. They take my body in their hands as a great hole opens in the middle; and get another bout of regional abuse.

"Surrender, and let it slither out," they tell me, helpfully.

"Git tae Falkirk," I say.

The pregnancy feels as if it will never end. I'm going to die with the baby still inside me, for the logistics of birth seem less possible. People walk through each other like doorways to get into the world, stampeding through the portals of their mothers; and my delicate frame, I think, will splinter as this visitor crashes through.

"Hey, Baw-heid!" I cry to my un-born child. The cord finally slips out with a glimmer of white light that starts to yellow as soon as the eyes of spectators are on it, and a squelch. Then there is silence. Silence except for my red sweat dripping onto the white of surgical ball gowns. Everyone is looking at the baby on

the end of my cord; and I follow their gazes down the quivering umbilicus to see it too.

But it is not a baby.

The translator has shown me books in your language. I've seen shelves of them in the shops, heard the shiny covers sigh as they're slipped out from between all the others, felt the breath of white pages fluttering as somebody flicks through them, watched the still illustrations come to life.

Alison was buying a gift for the man she loved and lost. Lower than low, on the human high street, she was arguing with Pinky as they looked through the section of books on pregnancy and birth.

"Five-minute Guide to Fatherhood. This will do."

"Oh, find him a better one than that."

"Why bother? Five minutes is how long he's known the mother-to-be. God! I still can't believe it. Met and mated before I could say 'actually, I've been in love with you for years...'"

"Have you seen her yet?"

"He showed me a photo..."

"And is she the angel he promised?"

"Well, I nearly died and went to heaven."

"Look, how about this one. *You're The Daddy.* It's got lots of diagrams..."

I can't claim to have translated every nuance of the conversation, but all the loud bits are right; other shoppers were turning and looking at our girl and her friend as they stomp to the checkout desk.

"Don't think he needs diagrams; she's up the duff! God, why did I see him as a geek?"

"You know he's moving his stuff out of the flat next week."

Alison was actually crying as she bought the book but the cashier was made of water, made of stones, and rushed on unheedingly to the next customer.

See, we could do with a guide to the etiquette of the unexpected in pregnancy and birth. We could use a manual of manners for the Coming-out Ball, tactful advice on how to behave when a baby is not a baby.

Does one, for example, turn away in disgust, making faces behind the freak's family backs? Or does one immediately overwhelm the new mother with

sickly offers of assistance? Or does one send a carefully-worded singing telegram, balancing congratulations with commiserations, at such a mixed emotional moment?

None of the proper people at this party know what to do. Not their fault: new born babies never turn out to be anything other than flawless seedlings from which immaculate plants will grow. They are instantly recognisable as the selves they are destined to be; and are often reassuringly familiar souls, old friends from previous lives.

My baby has none of these attributes. My baby isn't even a baby.

"Is it alive?" I hear someone whisper in the crowd.

"Must be," someone else replies. "How could it be born dead?"

One thing's for sure; the cord is alive. The pulsating string joining me to my offspring glows a lemon yellow then gleams a navel orange, exactly as they usually do. If the person on the end of it were dead, surely, the cord would be rotten.

"Has she had it yet?" I hear Madge Kennedy asking on the edge of the crowd.

They part silently to let her through. She looks at me first.

"Hello sweetheart," she says, "how did you get on?" She already sounds like a mum. "What a surprise, us both having our babies at the same ball. It must be a sign; they'll be best friends like we are."

The crowd's silence stiffens. Madge looks down at my child.

"Bloody hell, Angela, what's that?" she says.

If this were a dream, I would burst into tears now. I would absolutely cry my eyes out. And then, if this were a dream, I would wake up and find everything was alright; a symbolic message had been given, but not in place of my actual baby.

Still, although I can't cry, everyone can see how upset I am. The crowd huddles closer, and a hundred helpful arms are put around me. Telepathic traffic, which had been temporarily blocked by the shock, resumes and the good-will starts to flow; a hundred well-wishes sent regardless, like baby pink or blue balloons. Juno and Hazel are at either hand and I can feel them shaking. They experienced the birth as intimately as I did; but they don't even know whether they've got a niece or a nephew.

"Right," says Ma Kennedy briskly, "we've got some healing to do." She reaches out to take the fruit of my womb. "May I try?"

"Oh, please do," gasps Juno gratefully.

I sigh as the weight of the sick child is lifted from me.

Ma Kennedy holds Madge's smiling baby in one hand, and my non-smiling non-baby in the other. For a long time she stands, like a pair of scales, balancing them out. I know what she's trying to do; let the healthy life force of one of them flow through her body into the other. After a while, she shakes her head.

"I can't feel anything," she says, "there's an obstruction."

"Perhaps it's in the cord," says Ray Kennedy. "Let me try."

With plumber's fingers he touches the umbilical cord, running them along its length, from where it joins me to where it joins the thing at the other end. He examines the u-bends and sucks air through his teeth.

"I'm no expert," he says, "but I can't feel any knots in it."

Other people try more and more obscure methods of healing. With everything from shiatsu to ju-jitsu they attempt to reach my child. They sing to it, and swing it around on the end of the cord, but nothing seems to wake it from an unnatural slumber. And all the while, Madge is nursing her beautiful little baby, Hahhah.

"Is that the time?" says Juno eventually. "We must be off. Hazel has to go to work."

"Never mind art therapy," says Hazel, "let's stay here and get this baby sorted."

But I interrupt her, with the first words I've said since the birth.

"Life goes on," I say. "Let's not neglect your clientele."

Actually, I'm dying to leave the Coming-out Ball. Living or dead, my son or daughter doesn't compare well with Hahhah. And I'm pretty sure that when it comes to the pair of new mummies there, Madge Kennedy is the belle.

*

News travels faster than we do to the day centre.

"Angela had her baby at Madge Kennedy's Coming-out Ball!" Dot, the singalo who used to swear, is shouting in the entrance hall as we alight outside.

The family of social workers rush to meet us.

"Is it true?" they clamour. "Have you had your baby?"

"I've had it," I reply calmly, "but it's not a baby."

They cluster round, peering at the thing on the end of my umbilical cord, like some unidentifiable prize from a lucky dip.

"Has Sighman seen it yet?" they ask.

I shake my head.

"We've only just left the party."

"Well, come in and show him," they say.

They draw us into the centre of the building, where the singalos are sitting around in a circle, waiting for the therapy to start. When Sighman sees us he jumps to his feet.

"Angela's had her... er... Angela's given birth," says the Head social worker, beckoning him towards us.

"Congratulations," says Sighman.

"You haven't seen it yet."

I put it in his hand. He lowers his green gaze, and looks at it, long and hard.

"Have you ever seen anything like that before?" I ask him.

"As a matter of fact," he replies slowly, "I have."

"Whose baby was it?" I ask.

"It wasn't anyone's baby," he laughs.

"Do you think this is funny?"

"Yes, I do," he says, but his tone is thoughtful and his expression is serious.

It remains that way throughout the art therapy session. His look is unchanged every time I open my eyes. Normally, I never peep at my sister's painting because the colours are stronger and clearer in the dark; but today, I can barely see any colour inside and have to keep checking that it's really out there.

Everyone else seems to be enjoying the red and purple as much as usual. They're smeared like passion and power all over the singalos' faces. Only

Sighman seems pale. He has pulled a notebook from his pocket and is contemplating it quietly.

I shut my eyes again, and wait to be overwhelmed with colour. Last time was in the church vestry, where the purple turned blue; but I've been to the Coming-out Ball since then. Does giving birth mean I won't see the colours any more? Or is it because I keep looking at Sighman, concentrating on the black and white of singalo writing, reading the lines in his hand. Then he looks back at me, catching my eye, and all I can see is green. For a moment I feel as if I weren't a proper person at all, but a singalo; more into writing than art, blind to ruby and amethyst, but blinded by emerald.

"Are you with us, Angela?" my sister asks, in low telepathic tones.

"Right beside you," I reply, and try to drag my mind back into my body. I go as deep as I know how to, navel diving, and get sucked into the fibre of my umbilical cord: not the one that leads to my mother, the other one. Into its twists and turns I plunge, without the kaleidoscope effects we get in the tubes between Mum, Hazel and I. It's dark, wet and scary but if I can't contact my baby from the outside this may be the only way. My plug-hole meditation lasts until I reach the end of the line; then there is a flash of light.

"It moved!"

The shout comes from a long way away, and seems like an urgent call from home. Without stopping for breath, I spiral back through the blackness; and bob to the surface of my consciousness, gasping "What?"

"It moved!"

I open my eyes. Hazel opens hers. All the singalos open their eyes. Abruptly awoken from deep purple places, a lot of them mutter, "What?"

It was Sighman who spoke. He points to the baby with the tip of his singalo pencil, and says, "It moved."

The therapy must be working. The session stops and everyone gathers round to examine my featureless issue. It is about the same size as a proper baby, and the same colour as one; but its surface has no detail. It is just a body of undifferentiated matter; soft and smooth as a baby's skin.

People want to prod it, but I won't let them. It's funny how one can feel protective of even the most impenetrable child. Sighman is acting all parental too.

"Don't worry," he says as he escorts us to the door of the singalo centre. "I know someone who will help."

In the entrance hall we say goodbye. I think he actually tries to kiss me, but can't come close enough without both of us, and Juno and Hazel, getting dizzy. Nevertheless we get nearer than ever before; sharing his proximity so closely that when we turn to leave we can see Singalo City, his personal reality, superimposed on the proper world outside the double doors.

Shimmering like an urban mirage are the dusty spires and damp pavements of his home town; colourless in the smog that falls and the steam that rises. Long-standing buildings are ghosts of themselves, with rickety pillars bearing no real relation to the structures they support, impossible pallistrades and arches suspended in mid-air; vast plate glass windows reflecting unlikely views of the street and revolving doors with inconsistent exits. Mysterious signs in singalo writing are everywhere, telling the improbable city like a story.

On a busy street corner, just outside the Centre, I catch sight of Euphonia. She's dodging the traffic; things that look like cars till they turn a corner, like buses till they brake suddenly, a steady procession of taxis, tractors and tanks that change as regularly as the oil they do not need to run on. The singalo girl is accosting pedestrians with a giant placard. I can't read what's written on it, but I can hear what she's shouting, which is probably the same thing.

"Name of the third god! Name of the third god! I will whisper the name of the godchild, if you promise to keep it a secret!"

As we watch, a punter comes to take the evangelist up on her offer. We see her whisper the word in his ear, and he steps back in amazement, right off the edge of the pavement. She hauls him back to safety and sends him on his way with a friendly slap.

"Don't tell anyone else!" she shouts after him.

Then lifting her placard again, she resumes her sales pitch; and before long another customer stops and listens to the word. It's a downtrodden-looking singalo in a tatty mac; but when Euphonia whispers in his ear, he jumps for joy and dances down the street, throwing off his shabby overcoat as he goes.

"That's me," I mutter, "I'm the new religion."

"Pardon," says Sighman.

"Oh, nothing," I reply. Euphonia has discovered the best way to spread the word: privately, to one person at a time. Instead of declaiming it from the pulpit, trying to tell everybody at once, I should keep it a secret. That way, the good news will travel faster.

"Could you step aside so we can leave, please," says Juno to Sighman. "It's time for school, but we'll never find it in Singalo City."

Sighman stands back. The further he gets away from us, the fainter the urban outlines beyond the front door become. I don't really believe that he'll be able to help with the baby, but it was nice of him to say.

"We'll see you next time," I smile, as he disappears into the main body of the singalo centre. Then I turn back to find only the wide open spaces of the real world visible again outside the front door.

"Come on, let's go," says Juno, and we launch ourselves into the emptiness with eyes closed.

When we arrive in class everyone sees that I've had my baby straight away.

There's a crescendo of oohs and aahs, and an instant diminuendo when they see what's actually on the end of my umbilical cord. I expect this is a reaction I'll get used to.

In the silence, Juno asks for her students' help.

"We'd be grateful for any advice you can give," she says, "from any of your previous incarnations."

The subdued group slip quickly into a trance, but instead of a babble of ancestral voices falling over themselves to offer historical evidence, they are quiet.

"Is there anybody there?" asks Juno.

After a long pause, one voice replies politely.

"Everybody is here, but nobody knows what to say," it tells us. "We haven't seen anything like this before. Not identical, by any means, though there was once something similar."

"Who are you?" says Juno.

"My name is Refuselah," says the voice. "I am the oldest soul here."

I open my eyes an inch, to see whose body he is coming from. It is Spiros, the teenage boy whose breaking voice has broken the truth to us before, in epic chunks of channelled myth and history.

"There was once a mixed-race baby, half proper, half singalo," he says. "It looked a bit like yours. Same colour, same texture, but a different shape."

"Which was?" whispers Juno.

"Acorn shaped."

"What became of it?" I ask anxiously.

"You can see the oak tree," Refuselah says. "I am the oldest soul here and have the newest information. I know what will be." The voice comes from Spiros but is not his teenage squeak. The words are not ones he would choose; the syntax not what he would normally use. It seems the advice is coming from a higher source.

"Will my child ever talk?" I must find out the future from this spotty seer. "Will it be independent? Find love? Have a career?"

"All of these when it meets its perfect partner."

Oh, great; my mutant kin is going to mate. That prognosis is more positive, though, than almost any other he could have given me.

"When will this happen?"

"Once upon a time," Refuselah sounds like a fairy tale character himself, a mythical chanter, all nine muses speaking in chorus, as he adds: "It is futuristic, high-tech, aphoristic, kitsch; steeped in classical wisdom, stimulated by psychotropic leaves, signed by the author on a dotted line."

Everything written above that line now seems unreal as the bell goes for the end of class and we come back down to the circle of kids sitting on the story carpet, a well-worn rug with swirly patterns making paths through the woods, or mermaids' waving hair, or streaming blood from a dragon slain. Spiros has left his signature near where he sat; a teenage ink stain, tattoo-coloured, graffiti-styled. The voice of Refuselah is thus absorbed into the mat. Once the lesson is over our young man's vocabulary returns to illiterate grunts.

"But his prophesy made Angela's accident of birth sound like part of a plan," says Hazel, as we fly from school to church.

"And I'm beginning to see how it might be," I reply, "if I am indeed the godchild, as Euphonia says."

"What a silly name," says Juno.

"Why does it sound different every time we say it?" asks Hazel.

"I don't know, but if I am indeed the godchild, as Euphonia says, this could be a sign." I hug my strange baby firmly.

"You saw her canvassing on that street corner," says Juno. "She may have had sandwich boards but that singalo is one slice short of a picnic."

"And you saw how happy she made everybody," I reply. "That's what I'm going to do in church today. Call my congregation up to the altar one at a time, and utter my name to them."

"You can't do that," gasps Hazel.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Well, it isn't very modest," she replies.

"And modesty is the best policy," adds Juno.

"I thought it was honesty," I say.

So when the prayers are over and everyone is still on their knees, I look down on the crowded pews from the high altar.

"People," I boom, "I have some important news. The name of the third god has been revealed to me. And if you come up here one at a time, I will whisper it to you, so long as you promise not to breathe the word to another soul."

One by one they approach, as far as it's possible for people who are physically attached to their families; trusting me to tell them what they didn't want to hear from a singalo. They're all there, the Bingens and the Bonifaces; and the Smith family we met on holiday and converted to my faith.

And one by one I tell them, the name of the godchild is Angela. I myself am the third god, I say. It's me. Then I watch as one by one they walk away, wondering why they don't jump and sing like Euphonia's conquests on the street corner, and why their minor ailments don't miraculously clear up like her once-distressed clients at the day centre.

I watch my flock sit down again, with sniffles and slumped shoulders, and wonder if I should get the baby out from under my priestess's robes to show them proof of my mysterious status. But gentle pressure from my mother and my sister, trancing on either side of me, persuades me not to.

I chant the concluding liturgy of the day's service in the sweetest voice I can, to get a smile from my congregation. But when it is over they get up and hurry away, still looking worried; none of them even nodding to me as they usually do, or lingering in the aisle for a final word before they leave. Instead they squeeze through the double doors in a bit of a stampede.

"The word was meant to be the beginning, not the end," I sigh.

*

I feel so deflated that we can hardly get off the ground to fly to the Singalo Centre, but Hazel is excited.

"It's time to try for blue," she says silently. "All the singalos want us to do it, they really think we can."

I'm still thinking about the distressed faces of my congregation, their complete change in demeanour when I told them the good news. Why didn't they react with joy, the way I've seen Euphoria's people do? What did I say wrong?

"Shall we go for it then?" Hazel is asking. "The old lapis lazuli."

"The air-force colour, the royal navy shade, the oxbridge hue?" says Juno. "Rather!"

They join together in a jolly telepathic laugh.

"How about you, Angela?" says my sister. "Will you help us with blue? I'll give you a bouquet of cornflowers, bluebells and forget-me-nots, if you do; or a bracelet of turquoise and sapphire."

"Yeah, sure," I say. But, if I had a heart, it wouldn't be in it.

As soon as we alight at the security gates, we are surrounded by singalos, wanting to draw us into their entrance hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Hazel announces gaily, "it's B-day!"

There's a general cheer, which brings the family of social workers rushing out to see what's up.

"The art therapist is going to do blue," Surely Valiumtime informs the staff, in tones so lacking in distress that the therapy part seems redundant. "Hooray!"

The Head looks taken aback, Neckola tenses, and Kneena starts to shake.

"Blue?" they say. "Are you sure?"

"The inmates have been on at me for ages," says my sister, "and we do seem to get pretty close to it sometimes."

I can tell by the looks on their faces, the family of social workers are engaged in an emergency telepathic meeting. I can't hear their internal communication word for word, but do pick up the odd phrase.

"We are not a religious institution!" one of them says.

"But the singalos should be allowed to express their spirituality!" another replies.

"Blue is beyond the scope of art therapy sessions," a third protests.

"But Hazel is a professional," says a fourth. "And her sister is a priestess."

The fact that I am standing by, on call in case of complications, seems to resolve the matter for the social workers. Soon after this their worried expressions clear and their minds appear tranquil again.

"Alright then," says the Head. "But be careful."

The session starts in a hush of held breath; the yellow, fluffy hair on a baby's head; the orange, soft as a teddy bear; the red, sore as nappy rash. But as the art gets purpler, my attention starts to crawl in the opposite direction. Even with my eyes closed, I know that Sighman's not here. If he were here, even with his eyes closed, the room would be full of green.

I'd see him waving at me, like grass in the wind; smiling like sunlight on a pond in the woods, where trees' reflections go as deep as the trees themselves grow high. I'd feel the green of his being like verdigris all over me; yes, I could lichen it to that.

"Angela," says Hazel, "you're supposed to be thinking about purple."

"I have an aubergine in each hand," I reply, "and a ripe fig at my heart." But I can't get Sighman out of my head. Why isn't he here? He's come to every art therapy session since we mated, and although most of the time I completely ignore him, I always know that he's there. Where could he be instead? In his bedroom, hunched over his inventions, trying to forget about the deformed baby? Balancing the cups and balls of his model universe, as if our child had never been born? Typical singalo male!

"Angela," Hazel says again, "if you can't focus on the purple, you'll never feel blue."

But I'm making my own way there by a different track. Blue comes after green, too. In the rainbow that stretches over us all, the azure is reached via a jaded path with moss in its cracks, as well as the indigo way strewn with violets. I'm sighing, but the group are singing like mountain air. Going from purple to blue is a hop and a skip between breathing and not breathing; the aim is almost to die. Going from green to blue is a hop and a pop between air bubbles in the leaf-choked pool. The aim is almost to drown and the group are getting there, but I hold them back; looking for that piece of pond-life hiding under a stone, playing peekaboo with Sighman at the rush-hemmed water's edge of my...

"Mind!" shouts Hazel.

The bluey-green, like a pine needle, pricks the bluey-purple of a vein in my temple; and the whole art therapy session ends up awash with bloody red.

Alison knocked over her cup of rooibos tea, pressing enter with a flourish. It was dark in her flat, except for the bluey glow of her screen. How her fingers were finding the right keys was a mystery.

She had to stop writing for quite a while, to mop up the pages of her journal, where the faux notes were as unreadable as if a proper person had penned them. The flow had soaked into Urania's mouse mat because Alison hadn't noticed the spillage for ages; eyes fixed on the computer screen, lips murmuring the words that appeared as if she were reading them for the first time, so fast did the narrative flow through her... mind! The ideas barely touched the sides; and when she saw them on the page they were novel.

Shakespeare must have thought this too, as he paused to dip his pen in the ink. Spenser, and Sidney, and even the Earl of Surrey must have got to the end of a poem sometimes and thought 'Wow! That's so good.' Could it have been the same muse, in that moment, meeting a sweet spot in the brain of a human writer, channelling something divine.

Twenty of your earth minutes elapsed, while Alison flapped a whole kitchen roll of absorbent paper at her desk; but then she got back to unrolling the long, smoke-stained, tea-ingrained scroll of our story.

*

To prove how little time means to us, I'll show you how much has passed between our summer holiday dream and the dream party we go to tonight.

Instead of sunshine there's snow twinkling on the diamond-paned windows of the tiny cottage we're staying in. Instead of open-toed sandals, rows of rubber boots are lined up by the front door. Ray and his little helpers, the Kennedy boys, have been out collecting wood for the fire.

Sitting by the country hearth as the winter logs crackle and glow, I can finally shed the tears that have been welling up in me since the birth of my changeling child. Like I'm melting in the fire's warmth, the teardrops trickle down my face; and their crystal sparkle is reflected all around the room, in the shiny baubles which spruce up the tree, and the jewelled goblets of mulled wine. Everything I look at reminds me that my baby is half singalo, conceived in a cup-and-ball mating game.

But at this Christmas party I can be as miserable as I wish, without anyone noticing. The Kennedys are too engrossed with Madge's baby, Hahhah, who is now big enough to sit up and take notice of her presents; though she's more interested in the wrapping paper than the gifts inside. My baby is growing too, but not in any of the ways I'd hoped; no arms or legs, no facial features, no sign of intelligence.

Picture the difference between them: Hahhah, all motion and emotion in her woollen booties and a bonnet; and mine, inanimate in a knitted blanket. Hahhah is bright as a berry and sharp as holly, while mine just lies at the end of the cord, ivy-bound. It doesn't even have a name. No one's asked me what my baby is called.

I sniff dismally. In place of the sun-dried herbs that pervaded our summer holiday, this dream smells of winter spices: nutmeg, clove, cinnamon and ginger. Across the room, Hazel is cracking walnuts with the Kennedys; other members of the family are eating cold turkey sandwiches, and a cake whose darkness is concealed by its facade of white icing.

But at this festive table, I can binge on food and bring it up again undigested, without anyone noticing. It's a dysfunctional thing we can only do in our dream bodies; and that, coupled with crying, is all I want to do in this dream. The feeling that was left in me when my child was born is festering like a forgotten placenta; it might translate as post-natal depression. It gets worse when I look at

laughing baby Hahhah. Uncles and cousins are playing a game with her, the fun thing we can only do with babies in dreams, when they're beyond the cord-reach of their mothers: tossing her into the air and catching her safely as a bet on her future happiness.

In this whole room, I can't see anyone who isn't too merry, whether from eating or drinking, to come down to my level. Oh, I know they would if I asked them. If I gave so much as a whisper for assistance, let alone a cry for help, they would leave the baby mid-air and hurry to my aid. But I won't poop the whole party. A few quiet tears are one thing, but I don't want to piss on their roaring log fire.

I get slowly to my feet and walk out into the cottage hallway. It is decorated for the dream season with a symbolic combination of nature and artifice; mistletoe hangs with silver tinsel, and wreaths of holly leaves are studded with plastic red berries.

Wishing the eve was over, I gaze sadly at the front door. I can see snowflakes falling through the panes of frosted glass. And there is something else out there too, something big and bright red. Something fat and scarlet clad.

Before I know what I'm doing, I grab the doorknob and pull it open. I gasp when I see who is standing on the doorstep, dressed against the snow in a hooded crimson suit with white fur trim. It's Sighman.

"What are you doing here?" I say in surprise.

"I'm not," he replies.

"Not what?"

"I'm not here. This is just a dream."

"That looks real," I say, nodding at the big brown sack slung over his shoulder. "What's in it?"

"Stuff for the baby," he says.

"Hahhah?"

"No, silly, our baby," he says.

"It doesn't play with toys," I sigh.

"This is not toys." Sighman gives the sack a shake. Its rattle sounds more like scientific equipment; things to do experiments with.

"You're not going to dissect it," I say angrily.

"I don't need to," Sighman replies. "I already know what's inside." He gives me a smile, and his green eyes clash becomingly with the coat belted around his padded middle.

"How did you get here?" I ask, looking from his shiny boots to the snowy woods that ring the perimeter of the dream.

"A short cut," he says.

At this moment someone calls my name in the holiday hallway behind me, and I shut the door abruptly in his face.

"Angela?" says Mavis Kennedy. "Who were you talking to?"

"No one," I reply, "just to myself."

"You weren't thinking of going out there?" she asks.

"I was just looking at the snow. Did you know, every snowflake is different from each other?"

"No; every snowflake is joined to another. Anyway, you've got to come back in," she says. "It's time for the singing."

The traditional songs of the season are so old we no longer have any idea at all what they're about. The language is Irish, double Dutch, Chinese whispers; words passed from mouth to mouth so many times their original meanings are lost. This doesn't bother us though. We sing them loud and hearty as only mindless anthems can be sung; each of us knowing what we think they mean, but never needing to share our interpretations. In dreams we sing with our mouths rather than our minds. Like your songs of national pride or religious fervour they are learnt by rote, and repeated ad nauseam.

We go on carolling this gobbledegook, until the dream ends on a cheerful note, as it does every year. Paper hats slipped sideways, we wake up still drunk and singing like bums in the gutter.

"It's always the same," says one of the Kennedy boys, coming round groggily. "You look forward to a dream for ages, then its over in the blink of an eye."

*

I wake from this dream feeling happier than when I fell asleep, but not prepared for the laughter that meets us when we arrive in Juno's classroom next morning.

The students are sprawled in their seats in the desert, with maps and globes rolled up or rolled away; for they can see the whole of their glittery sandstorm world from where they are sitting. The books and blackboards have been torn up and wiped clean; for this class can read their teacher's mind and don't need to know anything further. Someone is giggling in the back row.

"What's going on?" asks Juno.

There is silence.

In the silence, I can hear them chanting, on a telepathic level. It is distant at first, as if some fierce tribe were approaching us across the plain, but as it gets closer, I can make out the words and the tune; the spiteful sing-song of playground bullies.

"Angela thinks she's God, Angela thinks she's God," they intone.

Juno and Hazel hear it too. We exchange nervous glances.

"Someone must have told them," I mutter. "It was supposed to be a secret!"

"What are we going to do?" hisses Juno.

"I'll make a speech," I reply. "Try to explain." I clear my throat and prepare to broadcast on two frequencies simultaneously, both telepathically and aloud:

"Ladies and gentleman, I hear what you're saying, but let me assure you that no-one was more surprised than me when I found out the name of the third god is Angela."

My voices resonate across the schoolroom, momentarily halting the angry tribe.

"You may have been aware of a singalo prophet spreading the news," I say. "Euterpretation is her name, but it's difficult for proper people to pronounce, so we call her the pink pantheon.

"Anyway, she has behaved in a very professional manner, passing on the message to one person at a time, and swearing them to secrecy to prevent mass hysteria. But clearly, some amateur has been unable to resist blurting it out in public."

In front of me, the rows of faces stay straight but the students are laughing inside. I can hear their telepathic chorus of derision.

"I know it's hard to accept a sudden revelation," I continue. "It was a job to believe it myself. But now I'm fully committed to the post of godchild, to filling the

role of third god to the best of my abilities. I swear to devote myself to your spiritual service. Hey, I'd even lay down my life for you, except that I'm probably immortal."

Behind their surly pouts the students are roaring with mirth. It isn't just them, either; all their previous incarnations have joined in the sport. Laud Biro and the Lunatic Poet rock with mocking laughter; and even the po-faced Refuselah seems to be having a bit of a titter.

"Oh Angela," says Juno beside me, "I think you'd better stop. It's just making them worse."

"One more try," I plead, and face the class with a different attitude. "No matter how much you laugh, I'll still love you."

"Whoops!" says Hazel, as the class rise to my challenge and the chanting starts again.

"You're gonna get your god-like head kicked in! You're gonna get your god-like head kicked in!"

Although from the outside the class still appear to be sitting calmly in rows, it is visible in all their eyes: revelation rage.

"Fly," says Juno, "fly away!"

"No," I reply, "I'm not afraid."

"It's time to go to church now anyway," she shouts, literally dragging Hazel and I off the ground.

The ancient Greeks, being a much bigger family than us, are unable to follow.

"I wanted to stay and sort it out with them," I protest, in the air. "It wouldn't have mattered being late for church."

"It would if you're God," Mum snaps.

But it wouldn't have mattered being late for church today, because nobody turns up.

Juno and Hazel sink into deep trances as soon as the pillars are erected, and I sit and wait for the congregation to arrive.

I hum a few litanies and twiddle my thumbs, but no one comes. I carve the columns into statues of some of my regular members, but still they don't appear. I

make a fountain spring from the font, and stone roses grow around the windows; but still I cannot attract anyone into my church.

Eventually I rouse my mother and sister.

"That was quick," they say.

"It hasn't happened yet," I reply.

They look around the empty pews.

"No one came?"

They huddle closer to me, cuddle me.

"Am I being persecuted for my righteousness?" I ask.

"Either that," says Juno, "or your self-righteousness has really pissed people off."

"I don't understand why they've taken it so badly," I say sadly. "All the singalos were delighted when Euterpret told them the good news."

"But they already think we're angels," says Hazel. "That's only one step away from gods."

The next time she looked up from her desk, it was light. Alison had been writing all night. With this dawning, she read back over the last few lines. She was not Shakespeare, or Spenser, Sidney or even the Earl of Surrey. She was not James Joyce or Herman Hesse, neither Austen nor Bronte, and not Kazuo Ishiguro either.

She was not so much thinking 'Wow! That's so good!' as 'Hey! Who wrote it?' At her evening classes she'd heard many theories of creativity. She'd read so much on the subject of channelled writing she could probably get a PhD. Her own subconscious clearly had a big say in the story; she recognised all its allusions and double-entendres, its obsessions and in-jokes. But there seemed to be a superconscious source too; that spoke in a voice more universal than Alison could ever manage by herself. Its frame of reference was more cosmic than she could ever imagine alone; though its bottom line, an adolescent coupling, was her own mytheme of the moment.

By now, Alison understood Angela pretty well. There was only one way to play her part, even by such a multiple personality. And this whole dictation by dead people, sorry, proper people, wannabe angels, thing; if reading and writing

were out of the question for the illusory eyes of all but a few visionary pps, how could Ange be managing the communication?

No, Alison had full control over her central character. The writing was strong; though the subject rather alien, she thought. The Earl wrote of Surrey, the Brontes about Bronte Country; rather awkward that her scene was set so far away from home and its stars were the illiterati.

She should have had a bath and gone to bed, then, or at least breakfast and mindless daytime TV. Instead Alison wrote on without a break, like her heroine, hurtling through time, space and the best dimension, which is plot:

On our endless journey between work and work and work we're on our way to Hazel's job at the day centre. Juno learnt a difficult lesson in the classroom earlier, and I was later forced to repent in church. Now we approach the institutional gates with caution, in case the distressed singalos have decided they'd be happier running the therapy sessions themselves.

Only Sighman is waiting for us in the entrance hall; pressing his face up against the glass of the double doors. It lights up when he sees me coming; green eyes for go.

"Hello Sighman," says Juno.

"Hello," he says, opening the door to let us in.

"How are you?" asks Hazel.

"I'm fine," he says, "but Angela looks very dim."

This is not an insult, by the way; we can see how people are feeling by the degree of light shining from them. On a good day we're so golden and bright you'd have to shade your eyes; but on a bad day we only have candle power.

"She's a bit upset," my mother tells Sighman.

"About the baby?" he asks anxiously.

"And something else," says Juno, "Shall we tell him what's going on, girls?"

Normally I'd say no, we don't need anyone else to know. I'd keep quiet, stay still, and let Juno and Hazel shelter my sole flickering flame. Normally, with a family as supportive as mine, I don't need any friends. But my mother and sister are fading too, their faces drained of light and colour as they pour their energy into me and my greedy baby, who's taking everything we've got and not giving anything back. Proper babies start to pay their way in the family from a very early

age, with a currency of love and hugs, but not my little pauper. It is eating into my personal resources and, in turn, I have been borrowing heavily from Juno and Hazel. It is time to take up Sighman's offer.

In the space you might take to buy a mate a drink, I pour out my woes to him, a bellyful of wine.

"You know that singalo girl who works here," I say. "The one whose name we can't..."

"Yes," says Sighman.

"You know she's whispering the secret name of god to everyone?"

"Yes," he replies.

"It's me," I say.

"I know," he says.

"She told you?"

"Yes, ages ago."

"Well, now all the proper people know too," I say, "and they're persecuting me about it."

"Why you?"

"Because it's me."

"I know, but why are they persecuting you?"

"They think I'm self-righteous," I sniff.

"What exactly did you tell them?"

"That the name of the godchild is Angela," I say. "I am the third god."

He bursts out laughing.

"That's what she told me!" I say indignantly.

"But she says that to everyone," he replies.

"What do you mean?"

"She says 'I'll tell you who the child of god is, if you promise not to tell anyone else,'" Sighman sniggers. "And then she says, 'It's you'."

"Hang on," I struggle, "she says 'It's you' to everyone? Not just to me?"

"That's right," says Sighman, "she whispers the same word in every single ear. I've seen her do it hundreds of times. She's a good friend of mine."

"So when she told Dot the name of god, the answer was 'It's you'. And when she said it to Surely, the answer was 'It's you', too!" I groan. "Dot and

Surely's souls were saved because she said they were the godchild: but my congregation were distressed because I told them I was."

"Sounds like it," says Sighman.

"Oh, I've been so stupid!" I cry. "Mum, Hazel, don't you see? It's you, not me."

"It's a trick," says Hazel.

"A gimmick," says Juno.

"No, it's not," Sighman replies. "Euterpreter really did receive the word in a vision. A long time ago, 'it's you' was whispered in her ear; but she increased the power of the revelation by sharing it instead of keeping it to herself."

"Oh, I've been so stupid," I repeat. "And selfish!"

"Perhaps it's not too late to undo the damage," says Juno.

"And say, sorry everyone, you are the godchild, not me," I reply. "No, I've lost their trust, and spoilt their innocence; and that's what it takes for the word to work. Euterpreter came to me specially, she battled up my church aisle so I could pass her secret on to proper people, but I've blown it. I must find her and apologise."

"She's not here," says Sighman. "It's her day off. She's gone to the city. And that reminds me. I've got something to tell you."

"Another bombshell?" I say.

"More of an eggshell," he says. "I know someone who can help us with the baby. But he needs to see it. I've got to take you all to Singalo City."

"No way," we say together instantly. "We're not going there."

We've got more chance of doing blue than we have of getting into Singalo City. Would be mad to live there, like the other residents of the centre, who have noticed our arrival by now and are coming into the entrance hall. Pat Crash, the one who couldn't control his legs before, scuttles with a mental walking-frame that's spindle-thin and gossamer-light. Surely, whose lips were webbed with eczema, unlaces a speech about straw spun into gold as we do a group shuffle towards the art session, almost as if we were one big family instead of a small one and a miscellaneous crew of singalos.

The team of social-workers are waiting for us in the therapy room, smiling at the excitement of their motley clientele.

"Everyone's rather hoping," they say, "that you're going to try for blue again."

"Well, don't hold your breath," says Hazel. "The world's finest artists have only glanced at it."

"And the highest priests in history have only seen it in rare glimpses," I add.

"But what if an artist and a priestess work together," says the head social worker, "with a lot of willing helpers?"

"I thought you weren't keen on us going so far," says Juno in surprise.

"But look at the effect it's having on the residents," says Neckola.

"The change in them is astonishing," agrees Kneena.

"That's not the art therapy," I laugh. "That's Euterpretation."

"She is very good at her job," says the Head.

"Yes, but it's the overtime she does that counts," I smile.

"She's just a volunteer," say the social workers, "like our other friend here."

My eye catches Sighman's and is caught for a moment on his greenery like you might get tangled in the undergrowth on a country walk. Held in his boughs, like the woodcutter's arms; lured into his bushy lair...

"Angela!" I'm strongly reprimanded by Hazel. "If we're going for blue you've got to get out of those woods."

Honestly, it's just like a fairy tale.

"Lay a trail of purple pebbles," suggests Juno telepathically, "in case you get lost."

"Do you really think we can do it?" I ask aloud.

"I bet," says Sighman. "If you can do blue, you can get to Singalo City."

*

We start with the colour of cholostrum, mother's milk: a suckling shade of yellow. Then my sister weans us onto orange; pumpkin, carrot and swede, pureed. When the red comes it is hot as chilli and makes us sweat; but the sweet is blackcurrant sorbet, cool and refreshing to finish the feast.

The thing they tell you about not swimming straight after you've eaten, wait for the food to go down so you don't drown; that's what they say about blue, too, but we do it anyway. We dive into lavender water and descend through the coloured layers of the lilac strata. Sometimes we sense the presence of strange companions in the depths; violet sparks like darting fish, and something bigger and darker, indigo shadows that circle us watchfully.

But the further we go into fathomless purple, the more it seems that nothing can be living here. The pace is so slow and the pressure is incredible. Every moment it is harder to move, as if we were becoming sedimentary. But we keep falling; falling like dead starfish, the lines of communication failing. We're going to become a family of floating fossils, lost forever beyond telepathic help. Can anyone hear me, I think desperately; Mum, Hazel, are you there?

Silence rings until my head feels like a diving helmet, old gold like a bell, its bubble about to burst. My body is going to blackberry crumble and my soul will dissolve into mauve; I will be a layer of silt, on the bottom of this sea, if it has a bottom. My only hope now is that I lose consciousness before I get there (and there's nothing proper people hate more than losing consciousness, as I've said before).

The purple is only inches away from being called black, suffocating me like a blanket in the night. Though my body can hardly move, my mind is racing; praying to the gods for help as I make the translation from art to heaven.

"Look up!" Suddenly I can hear Hazel's voice in mine again. The telepathic communication is back on line. The wires between us are buzzing ultra-violet.

I think we must have touched the bottom of the sea of purple. I think we've gone as low as we can go. In the transitional moment the colour almost kills us; but it is the condition of our rebirth, the terms of our rising again. Inky, these depths are underwritten; there is hardly anything I can say on the ocean floor. Looking up from beneath is ten thousand leagues more mysterious than looking down into the sea from above the waterline.

When the intercom comes on, Hazel talks me back the way we came, having been all the way. The pressure lifts and I can feel the bubble of me rushing upwards, through ever lighter shades.

"Wheeeeeee!" I scream, overcome with relief as we rise.

I can see the outlines of their bodies on either side of me again, the colour azure, the mood lifting.

"We've done it," says Hazel.

We're alive, in a sea of aqua-marine; bobbing up through navy layers. We break the surface and the sky above is turquoise. Juno, Hazel and I emerge streaming from the watery deep. It laps, lazuli, around our ankles. Then we step out of our bodies like you would step out of wet swimsuits.

All around us singalos are lying on the floor of the day centre, beached on duck-egg towels; staring up at the airforce blue.

"Don't look directly at the sun," Juno says. "You could go blind."

"Really?" I say, looking at Phoebus' brilliant orb to see if it's true.

In this vision, the sun in the sky and the pupil in my eye become a matching pair of discs. The pupil is a black hole, absorbing every sight; the sun is a circle of brightest light. Both are ringed with peacock blue, iris and cloudless sky, but when they meet they eclipse each other, cancelling each other out; the ultimate in black and white, the O in solar.

As I lower my gaze to the room again, it is not with grey blindness, but with a golden eye I see.

"Where are we?" I say. For this is not where the session started; and though the art therapy made us swim, I'm sure I haven't taken a step.

"It's where my best friend lives," says Sighman.

The room is similar to his bedroom at the Centre. It is full of cups and balls balanced on precarious scaffolding; but structurally this is a completely different building.

"This is my best friend," says Sighman.

"Hello," says a singalo male, standing in the corner.

Neither Juno, Hazel nor I reply. We are staring in silent astonishment at the room we are in, the room we were not in before. We can still dimly see the singalos from the day centre lying on the floor, but at eye level are the filing cabinets and towering constructions of an unfamiliar skyline. This must be Singalo City.

"How did we get here?" Hazel's voice rings in my head.

"By the blue," I whisper. "Sighman said."

"How are we going to get back?"

I don't know. I look at my ex-mate. One minute he was in an art therapy session for the distressed; the next he is happily at home in an alien environment. One minute he was relaxing in a yellowy-orange glow; the next he is talking energetically to a singalo in a loud green shirt.

Juno, Hazel and I are staring in silent astonishment at this shirt. Even in dreams we've never seen such a vivid shade of green. The satin that collects at the singalo's cuffs and stretches across his chest is dappled, as if with the movement of sunlight across its surface, although the room is dusky. From the silk swish of its untucked tails to the firm point of the lapels it is stroked by iridescence, glistening with kisses.

I've always known that singalos wear clothes, but have tried to ignore the fact. Proper people find clothes a bit embarrassing because they are so far removed from our own needs. A blouse putting on a bra, a pair of trousers popping on some socks; that's how silly a proper person wearing clothes would look.

Without a mind/body split, there is no difference between us dressed and undressed. We are always suitably attired. This singalo's shirt, however, makes me wonder what I would wear; if I were ever found to be naked. How did he get the curves so sensual, the cut so casual, the colour greener than our wildest dreams? If I had a hammer, and a hunk of emerald rock; and if I beat it for a hundred years into a sheet of soft emerald cloth; and if I cut out the pattern using birds' wings as a template for the sleeves, and butterflies for the perfect symmetry of the collar, I couldn't make a shirt as beautiful as this.

The singalo probably didn't make his like that; it would be technically impossible. But for me, whose only factory is the imagination, the tailoring would have to be magical.

Sighman sees us staring at his friend.

"It's Look," he says, pushing him forward.

We step backward.

"His name is Look," Sighman says again, and the singalo man smiles.

Now we manage to stammer our own introductions; Juno, Angela and Hazel. It confused us, the stranger's name being Look; when looking at him was what we were doing.

Look asks if he can see the baby.

Hesitantly, I hold it up to show him. He roars with laughter. I snatch my child back.

"Sorry," he says. "It's just so funny. When you find out what your baby is you'll laugh too."

I don't think Look can be a parent; he may be mistaken about this source of amusement.

"So what are you," asks Juno abruptly.

"I'm a scientist," he says, "so please forgive my laboratorial sense of humour."

I don't care any more, just want to get out of there. It's made me edgy, hanging around for ages on the blue-green side of an art therapy session, when we really should be going back down through the reds and oranges. I order him in the yellow voice of an angel to perform the experiment quickly and prove what my baby is, so that I can return to the sulphurous atmosphere of the Real World.

"A couple of our friends want to come and watch," says Sighman. "The girl who lives in the attic, and Eunice."

"She's here?" I say.

"She's out in the street, touting for customers, about to make someone's day. Come and see." Sighman walks to the window as he speaks and beckons us over.

The street corner scene outside Look's flat is indistinguishable from the street corner outside the day centre, presumably in another part of the city. It is pervaded by a flashing blue light that makes everything look only half real. On and off, on and off it goes; casting the whole neighbourhood in continual doubt.

There is Eunice waving her placard at the natives. Singalos move so fast over the ground that they pass in a stream. Though proper people can fly at the speed of thought, we'd be slow and clumsy on city streets; tangled in the cords that bind us like weed in the water.

A singalo screeches to a halt beside Eunice's stall, causing the traffic behind him to break sharply. The usual pleasantries are exchanged then the prophet whispers something special in his ear. We can't hear it, for the tooting of the public hordes; but the body-language is eloquent with which this man receives news of his divine status.

"Me?" he mouths. "The child of god?"

Sighman opens the window and shouts out into the street:

"Eunice! Up here!"

His singalo arm beckons her from a hole high in the wall. She shoulders her placard and starts to cross the street. Sighman closes the window.

"Why do you bother with this fiddly invisibility?" I ask him, tapping the glass.

"To let in the light, but not the light-fingered," he says, then turns and points at the singalo object dominating Look's room. "I can't begin to tell you how valuable the computer is."

The translator tells me that is the best word to use, though it's a million miles away from the kind of computer Alison has. One click, a short-cut across the universe to where she sits in the bluey light of her screen, in a flat that makes Look's apartment look luxurious, churning out cheap analogies for this priceless translation.

*

At first I think they don't use the computer very often, because it is covered in what you would call cobwebs. The rusty old thing seems rather hard to start; Sighman kicks it with his singalo toe-cap.

"Careful!" I say.

"It's alright," he replies, "you have to boot it up."

I suppose he turns it on; I'm only looking at his face, not the machine; but his features are suddenly transformed and his eyes light up. I turn to face the computer and gasp too; the sort you'd give to see a spider's web in sunshine after the rain.

"Where is the source of the light?" I stammer.

Sighman doesn't take his eyes off the gleaming construction. A soldered tree, still smoldering; it must have grown from glowing metalwork, with silver rods and tiny copper nuts and bolts; knots in the steel-spun trunk of a machine. There's an electric crown of green leaves, thousands of wires sparking a viridescent haze; and between two branches, an illuminated tissue of fibre-optic lace is strung. The gossamer network is shimmering with beads that cling to the almost invisible threads; balls, similar to the ones I saw in the mating game. They

pose at the junctions, spinning to stay on the crazy lines, but poised as dew drops. What a luminous image of lace and logic.

This radiant web is casting a crisscross shadow on Sighman's face. It seems to give him some proper character.

"Where is the source of the light?"

"It comes from within," he replies with a smile.

"It's self inflammatory?"

"Dazzled by the enlightenment."

I think he means the kit is scientific, with physical properties and accountable parts; but this explanation, like any other, means nothing to angels, who believe only in things they can't see.

"So what else does it do?" I frown.

"It doesn't do anything," says Sighman, "until we put this in." He opens the drawer of a filing cabinet sharply, and takes something out.

"What is that?" I say.

"A removable device."

Then he seems to put it in the machine, so the fly-buzzing of the web gets more urgent, its vibrations keener; but my attention is taken by Sighman's friend who suddenly starts to speak. Look's voice has the same quality as the electronic hum, but much louder.

"Hmm," he announces, "we're ready to go. I'll get the girl from the attic."

As soon as Look disappears through the door, Juno and Hazel nudge me internally, one on either side.

"Excuse me," I say to Sighman. "How did you make this computer?"

"I didn't make it," he answers proudly. "It grew."

"From what?"

"An acorn," Sighman says.

In his best friend's bedroom I get down on my hands and knees. At the foot of the metal tree-trunk, at the root of the arboreal hardware, I see a cup and ball of organic matter. Not black, like the ones we played with at the singalo centre, but something you might call flesh-colour.

It reminds me of a story I heard ages ago, an old wives tale about her grandchild who wasn't a proper person, but a cup-shape made of bone, with a ball the size of a baby's head inside. A skin-coloured acorn.

"Who told us that story?" I ask Juno and Hazel silently.

"One of my students," Mum says. "It was a past-life regression in history class.

"I remember," cries Hazel. 'A baby turned into an old lady and told a tale of a changeling. Half proper, half singalo. "

"Inanimate! Inarticulate!" I tug the cord to my own baby excitedly. "Is Sighman saying this computer is that child? Even if it's a tree, mine could be part of its family."

He doesn't hear our unspoken decision that my baby is a cousin of IT.. Staring between the muscular metal branches of the machine, he reads the cobweb message; a latticework of laser-fine lines, where pregnant dewdrops hang for a pendulous moment, making the mesh gleam at that point, then shimmy off the gridiron maze.

That's all the computer is, in close up. Back a step or two, where we're standing, there is the appearance of moving pictures. Figures, faces, landscapes; animated by drops of radiant water on a silk screen. A plot is woven in glistening images on the web; characters are coming to life in the warp and weft of the narrative loom. As if it were what you would call a VDU, Vivid Drama Unfolds on its surface.

We cannot believe our eyes. Imagine Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte watching television for the first time; imagine Leonardo Da Vinci at the movies, Pitt the Younger on a Playstation. Juno, Hazel and I are staring in that kind of awe at the circular screen.

My green-eyed mate is a film star. In an endless series of trailers for films we never get to see in full, a Sighman look-alike acts out his fate in situations as foreign as the ones we encountered in the mating game. In a series of silly hats and contrasting settings we see him making love and war; making long journeys in vehicles as varied as horse drawn carriages and motor cars, camels and jets; eating food as diverse as teeth-torn raw steak and plastic-packaged burgers.

"The appearance of different historical periods," says Sighman, "is due to the temporal exchange rate."

"Spare me the singalo lingo," I reply.

But before I can get his story straight, Look comes back, in kaleidoscopic fragments; the door to his room as colourful and crazy as any at the day centre.

“Got the girls!” he says.

More singalos are appearing behind him. Eudora steps into the room with her ‘name of the third god’ placard, but props it up against the doorframe and leaves it standing upside down. Juno, Hazel and I eye her eagerly; but not half as eagerly as she eyes us, our eyes being only half as real.

When she blinks, her eyelids really close, and clearly open again afterwards. Her body is a temple of separation; from the individual strands of hair on her head, to the arms and legs that move autonomously. If she were to lose a finger in an accident, none of the others would notice; her hand, her arm, her whole body could carry on as if nothing had happened. But if a proper person lost *uno* digit, cord rot would spread, and eventually their whole family would suffer a complete loss of life force from the dripping tap of the missing finger.

Me and my family have got a bit blasé about hanging out with singalos, from spending so much time with Sighman and the others at the distressed centre; but meeting a new one we feel shy again. The girl from the attic trips through the psychedelic door.

“Wow! Angels! In your room, Look! Lucky bastard,” she says.

“They’ve come to use the computer,” he replies.

“Do they know how to?”

It’s funny how singalos’ mouths really move as they talk, the shape changing in sync with the sounds, no slippage. Our lips just become misty and ambiguous, to blur the fact that words don’t really come from there, when we speak.

“Why don’t you demonstrate,” Sighman takes this strange lady’s hand to draw her into the room. With her other hand, she fluffs up her singalo hair.

“Ooh, can I? Be a hero then and get my memory stick.”

“Your what?” says Hazel. I might be shy, but she’s more than ready to take on this new girl who’s flirting with my boyfriend.

“Her removable disk,” Sighman replies. He crosses the room on his long singalo legs to a filing cabinet in the far corner. Opening a drawer, he peers in with a hallowed expression on his face. “On second thoughts,” he says, turning back to us, “I think Angela had better see them first.”

"Of course she should," says Look. He extends a solicitous arm to escort me across the room to my private viewing, though obviously my mother and sister have to follow close behind, with a glance of triumph at the singalo girl.

"Now, brace yourself," says Sighman, "and take a peep."

"There's no need to be so patronising," I tell him, boldly bending over the drawer and staring in.

The shock makes me disappear for an instant, as proper people do; and when I return his arm goes right through me, where he'd reached out to grab the suddenly empty air. He pulls it back, with the smell of burning.

"Babies!" I slam the drawer shut.

"No, Angela," he says, as kindly as he can without actually patting me, "they're USB sticks." He opens the drawer again.

"They're babies!" I wail.

Juno and Hazel are peering past me, into the filing cabinet.

"Not identical, by any means; though there was once something similar," they remember the history lesson again.

Smiling flamboyantly now, Sighman takes one out of the filing cabinet with a flourish. He holds it between finger and thumb and performs a sleight of hand trick at the computer, popping out the old one and swapping them over. This just looks like showing off to me, so I turn away from him and try to befriend the girl from upstairs. She bows at me, sort of genuflects, I think, but it's difficult to tell with that bendy singalo body. I simply nod back.

"I know what an attic is," I say to her. "We stayed in one at Hypnos' dream hotel. Do you have trouble with ghosts?"

I'm conscious of trying to make my huge golden mouth move in time with the words; but it's all la-la-la as if I'm in the back row of the angelic chorus.

"Have you known Sighman long?" she replies.

"Just long enough to mate with."

"You're just mates?" she says. "That's alright then."

"They've got a child together." Hazel chimes into my heavenly chord.

"Not tied together, no!" laughs the singalo. She's getting very rosy-cheeked, talking to us; same effect as we have on the pink pantheon.

"But you don't understand dear," Juno insists, "Angela and Sighman have a special thing..."

“Nothing special?” says the girl. “Thank goodness.”

“No, no, no,” Mum peals like church bells, but I stop her going on.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tinkle softly, “there’s no competition.”

Sighman steps back from the web, revealing a short white cord clipped to his wrist that loosely weaves him into the heart of the machine.

“What’s that?” It’s weird to see him attached to something like I’m attached to my mother, my sister and my baby; and I’m touched by it, though it’s obviously artificial.

“Sometimes I get so excited the remote control flies out of my hand. Wheeeeeee! It can be dangerous.”

It strikes me suddenly – though now I’ve known the idea a long time it seems obvious – that there must be some connection between him and the actor on the screen. Time and space are accessories after the fact when you’re laced together in a live link up with an alter ego, no matter how remote and out of control.

Anyway, it’s your go,” he says to the girl from the attic. “Alleysun, turn it on.”

She flicks a switch like a pewter spider in centre of the web and the screen bursts into light. It magnifies the pores of her singalo skin, the silvery sheen of its surface. Balls start shooting out of the spider’s legs, twitched into the maze of lace lit-up electric. Tiny cups cluster on the cobweb threads, each waiting for a mating. With every catch, every random coupling, a rush of images appears on the net.

The star of this screen is the girl standing in front of us. A version of her, anyway. It’s the portrait of a person in dried-up felt tip pens and blunt coloured pencils, compared to the real her. Yes, even compared to singalos you look like primary school art, stuck to a grubby fridge door, with barely a streak of glitter-glue between the whole human race of you.

And oh-my-gods, the hair! The first thing we see on the screen, as the cup and ball dewdrops make pixel patterns before they fall, is her coiffure; not so much beehive as old man’s beard. Our screen is her looking glass; she’s actually standing in front of it with a hairbrush, which she soon starts using as a microphone instead, miming along to some other world music in the background.

I'm not being rude, but if we looked like Alison the mirror would never have been invented.

Then another ball hits, and we get another life-clip. It seems just as meaningless; she puts a tea-bag in a cup, pours on boiling water. Then we see her inhaling the steam as if it were the herbs of Mount Helicon, about to inspire a creative act; sipping it like hot Hippocrene spring, good for art as well as life. Suddenly, this alien, this human looks more like somebody we could dance in a circle with; holding hands with the same muses we met in the mountainous region between worlds

Another cup is filled and the girl we were fooled into thinking rocked, crumbles. At the bottom of the stairs, in the house she shares, the guy who looks like Sighman, acts like him too, stands; not knowing what to say while she cries. The paper-walled hallway is full of cardboard boxes; the bits and pieces of a single man. He's moving out, moving in; leaving her, going to live with an angel. The girl from the garret, she's always been philosophical, knew they were only platonic; but now that he's found poetry, perhaps she should have tried harder. Crying and singing, too, at this last minute; something operatic. "Me me me me! I saw you first. I love you best. I need you most."

But he's the one who shrugs helplessly. Stutters meaninglessly; "I do love you. But not like that." Needs a hand to carry the bloody boxes to the car; greasy, heavy boxes leaking nuts and bolts with barely a book or a cushion among his creature comforts.

"Anyway, she's out of your league, mate," the screen Alleysun insists bravely, with a wobbling bottom lip. "If she's as beautiful as you say she is..."

"She's more beautiful than I can say."

With that killer line, he leaves. No more is said and so it echoes, the precedence of this other girl over our girl, until the next cup is socked by the next tiny ball.

The girl from the attic meets Simon's angel. She doesn't see her clearly, so we can't either; just a whoosh of long golden hair, a supermodel's body in clinging mink-coloured satin, and a pair of high heels that take her one step closer to heaven, at over six feet tall. And that's just what she wears to put out the milk bottles.

We don't see her face, only the tumbling blonde ringlets and the endless tanned legs, in Alison's rear view mirror as she drives past. At 11 o'clock at night, with heartbreak music blaring from inside her car.

It cuts off abruptly as another cup and ball-induced vision starts; set this time in the boom-beat silence of her bedroom. The frosting of old talcum powder and dandruff gives the place a silvery look in the moonlight that slides its legs in through the half-pulled curtains. From the gap between dark-folded drapes, a net curtain makes a web of shadows on the walls.

There were pictures of angels here, until recently; posters of heavenly beings, from cherubim to seraphim, with the odd new-age fairy on holographic paper. But the evidence is they've recently been taken down. There's been a disillusionment. Only the blue-tak shows up like dewdrops on the night-webbed wall.

This is the attic flat and the girl is in bed. She's still clutching the human hairbrush, but now she is using it to masturbate with; the handle mostly, though the bristles' frisson comes close to expressing her must. It's a sad scene in a single bed, covers heaped in the unheated flat; only her pale face showing, slowly rolling moonlit teardrops onto the lacy pillowcase.

It's an image to brush away like a cobweb. Alleysun turns the picture off abruptly. The singalo gives a little shudder and hugs her solo self for reassurance. It doesn't work though; her feelings are more than screen-deep.

"My life," she says, "as portrayed by some cardboard loser on a clockwork planet. But that's not all this computer can do. The basic operation of the system is boring so I use it as a word processor to write my own stories on! You know, make them up myself."

"Lovely," I say, a bit insincerely I'm afraid. I like stories, but they're wasted on people who can't read.

"Go on Alleysun," says my mate, "write one now."

Actually, Sighman might like her better than me because she's literate. It is a good look. Her singalo skirt lifts slightly as she reaches for the hardest words, and I sort of see the point of wearing clothes, for the first time.

She types her tale by clicking the cup 'n' ball letter keys, arranged across the web like random raindrops, inscribed with the abstract characters that make

up the singalo alphabet. There are thirty eight letters in all; I know that much, though I don't understand what they mean.

Her face level with the screen, she raises her arms, and runs her fingers over the keys. With sweeping circles she can reach the entire circumference of the net. I don't know why it is called writing: it looks more like dancing to me. Although she has her back to the audience, the girl from the attic performs brilliantly. Swaying, dipping, stretching, gliding; while on the screen graceful figures move to her rhythm in rows that rise and fall, march and waltz, in a beautiful ballroom of blue light.

When she finishes, we cheer.

"Wait a minute, you haven't read it yet," she says.

"Oh, we can't read," I reply. I'd rather hoped not to have to admit it, but now that the subject is raised, it's impossible not to.

"Never mind, I'll read it to you," she says.

Standing very still, with only her eyes moving over the now motionless figures on the screen, she says;

"Muse of starlight, Muse of midnight, Muse of coal black, mole black, hole black; Muse of the universe, Muse of the heavenly chorus, speak to me and through me tell your story. Teacher of physicists, guide to astronomers, inspirer of all science fiction writers; Urania. Tonight, I pick you."

We applaud politely.

"No," she says, "that's only the invocation. I always begin with a plea to the Muses. They give me the idea for a story. Only, tonight, it hasn't come yet."

"We've met the Muses."

"You have?" Alleysun looks relieved. "I wasn't sure they were really... real."

"It was in a dream," Juno explains.

"Sometimes they whisper to me," says the singalo girl. She cracks her knuckles and spreads her fingers over the web of gossamer connections and cup'n'ball clues.

"Speak ladies; your servant is listening," she rattles the lettered beads strung on luminous lines. "They've spun me some threads, I can tell you. A world created by the weaver, perfected by the weaver's apprentice. A girl could be turned into a spider for daring to embroider the goddess's tale. She could prick

her finger on the spindle and sleep for a hundred copyright years. But the Muses told me about a princess who could spin straw into gold and mustn't be surprised if I aspire to that too."

"Those are great stories," Hazel agrees.

"Oh, but the best thread is the one that leads out of the maze; Ariadne-style, avoiding the bullshit." The girl's fingers twitch on the cobweb keyboard. "Once upon a time... oh, come on, Muse, can't you come up with anything new?"

"You know there are nine of them, don't you? Calliope, Clio, Polyhymnia..." I sound a bit repetitive, listing their names; but it must come across as an invocation, for Alleysun says;

"Do you want a go?"

"I can't write," I speak through gritted teeth.

"You could dictate something to me."

"I wouldn't know what to say."

"You're an angel, tell me your story. Just a day in your life; got to be worth hearing."

"We don't have days, and it isn't a life. Mine's been a complete nightmare lately," I sigh. "Ever since I got the message to mate with a member of the opposite species, things have been difficult. Being told I was the child of Lee and Sheela made matters worse. And then, when the baby came along and it turned out to be this..." I hold the device out to show her.

"The real world has been dying," she says, "for such a perfect tragedy."

"It's not a tragedy, it's a removable disk." Look has been on his knees, tightening screws and untangling cables near the roots of the IT tree. "And I'm dying to try it out; to, er, put it in." He holds out his hand to take the baby.

"How can my child be computer software?" I sob.

"Because somebody else's child was the hardware," Sighman says. "It seems that's what happens when you mix angel with spirit."

With an almost organic squelch, he removes the device that's already in the slot in the bark of the electronic oak then looks at me questioningly.

I clasp the baby.

"Hand it over," he says. "I'm sure it won't hurt."

We hadn't even considered the possibility of it hurting; Juno, Hazel and I exchange horrified glances. Fresh from giving birth, I'm no stranger to pain, though proper people never really feel anything.

Sighman smiles at me reassuringly, but I can see excitement and fear in his green eyes as he takes the baby from me. He nods his thanks then casually throws it at a slit in the bark of the computer tree, luminescent with a lichen sheen. I wince, not expecting to be hurt myself but wondering if the child feels a scratch as it slots in.

"Careful," I snap at Sighman.

"Sshh!" says Look.

Dots of light are appearing all over the circular screen, like stars twinkling in the night sky; not static for a minute, they shoot out of sight, or fade and die, while others are born elsewhere. In every new formation, they make a face; each different, but all winking. The web is a picture of continual change, always weaving into meaning, but never quite making the words. Sighman steps closer to the screen and raises his arms to twiddle with the computer circuits.

"Let's find out what it does."

"Maybe it's doing it already," I say.

"No, that's just a screen saver," he mutters.

I don't know what this means, but it sounds a bit derogatory. Staring at the patterns that may or may not be random, I say;

"I really don't mind if it's all my baby can do. I still love it."

Look joins Sighman at the circular keyboard.

"We've got some superior programming here," he says. He raises his arms to join Sighman in a technical pas de deux, and pauses dramatically for a moment. Then, on some silent count of three, both of them begin tapping away at the keys.

"How long do you think this will take?" asks Hazel, inside my head.

"Why?"

"I'm worried about what's happening at the day centre," she says. "We left in the middle of art therapy when everything was blue. I hope the distressed singalos are okay."

"Perhaps we can pop back and check on them," I say; absent-mindedly speaking aloud and making Eudora jump as she stands next to us watching the stars on the screen.

"Pardon?" she says.

"We were just wondering what was going on at the Singalo Centre," I tell her, embarrassed.

"At the what?" she says.

"The day centre," I stammer, "for distressed singalos. Where you work."

"We don't call it that," she says.

"Well, it was very improper of us to up and leave the session, but Sighman led us astray. He brought us here somehow," I gabble, "and we're not sure of the way back."

Eudora smiles a singalo smile that we actually find quite frightening.

"I'll go and check for you," she says.

"Really?" I say.

"That's very kind," says Hazel.

"Isn't it awfully difficult to get there?" asks Juno.

"It's just a short walk for me," says Eudora, "but it's harder for you. You came through blue."

She performs a rather sinister action that to you would look like putting on a big black coat.

"Boys," she says, as she goes to the door, "I'm just popping to work. I'll be back soon. Bye!"

Sighman and Look grunt a response, without looking up. They don't seem to have made much headway with my baby. As soon as the pink pantheon has left, I move closer to the screen.

"How's it going?" I ask.

"Fine," says Sighman. His fingers strum the web and his whole body resonates business.

"Nothing's happening yet," says Look. He stands back and wipes his brow. I watch the cord that stretches from his wrist to the computer dangle and swing.

Then Sighman does the same thing.

"I've tried every way I know to access this data," he sighs, "but I just can't hack in..."

They both look quite funny, attached to each other through the computer as if they were proper people. Their umbilical cables are neon vine, high-tech twine.

"Do your cords ever get tangled?" I ask.

"No," says Sighman.

"Mine sometimes gets caught on my shirt buttons," says Look.

I unconsciously grip the umbilical cord that links me to my baby; and the screen flickers. Lightening crackles across the dark web.

"Yes!" says Sighman. "It's the connection! Oh, Angela, do that again."

I take the lead more firmly in my hand, and jerk it about a bit. The buzzing and glowing on the screen increases. I stroke the cord, in long slow movements, from where it joins me to where it plugs into the computer. The night sky background is breaking up, and day flashes across the screen.

"Yes! Yes!" says Sighman.

Yellow, orange and red, the circular web warms up slowly. Standing side by side in a sort of electronic sunrise, Sighman and I watch the awesome effect as I tweak the wiring of my umbilical cord. His singalo smile and my proper one widen with delight.

Suddenly a cup kicks out of the spider-legged centre and into the maze of spinning threads. The whole web quivers and its cache of jiggling balls threaten to fall. Unerringly, it seems, the cup seeks out its ideal ball and mates with it in an instant. Things go ballistic; hundreds of neutral dewdrops light up, making a pattern of uv atoms. We blink and the screen is fringed with blue frills; our view now framed by the hood of a baby's cradle.

Rimmed by the chequered flounces are a couple of faces I recognise. It is Sighman and I from the mating game, the token figures we played with so clumsily. They look different from our real selves; but similar to each other.

It's the same versions of me and Sighman who had car breakdowns and hot chocolate and jealous rages. We're the ones who went hill walking and wore no underwear. Now we appear to be cooing at the contents of a blue gingham-trimmed crib; the baby, presumably, we conceived in Venice in the afternoon. It's all coming back to me with startling clarity for something so fleeting and surreal.

"What's going on?" I say to Sighman. "I thought it was only a game."

"It had to be more than that, to get real results," he replies.

Neither of us take our eyes off the screen. The other couple are similarly fixated on their issue.

"What sort of baby do you think they've got?" I murmur.

Sighman shrugs, and disturbs my hold on the umbilical cord. The picture on the screen flickers, and I think the perspective is shifting to show the baby's head, but it changes to a big ball spinning in space, an orb in blue and green.

"That's pretty," I say, watching it turn on its axis, the colours mixing like oil and water.

Look rolls his eyes. Then he shouts, "Hey, three new buttons!"

He points to the branch of the computer where the buttons have budded, each inscribed with a singalo word.

"What do they say?" I ask.

Our new friends speak aloud, all three as one, as Look points gleefully to each of the words in turn:

"Help. Send. Save."

"Press one," I urge him.

"Which?" says Alleysun.

"It has to be Help," says Sighman. "We don't have anything to Save or Send yet."

Look flicks the bud-button firmly with his single finger. Help comes. Assistance arrives. Succour shows up. Aid appears. The story is in so many different shades of English; this is where the translation begins.

*

Alison was going to stop writing this book. She was so angry about being called a 'cardboard loser', between her own covers too. But how could that voice see her? A narrator, even an omniscient one, wouldn't normally trump the author when it came to giving home truths. Maybe at the screen's interface there was some reflection; but honestly, how could the fictional characters see her in bed, when she wasn't even thinking about the bloody novel. Alison was going to stop writing it. She was so afraid.

Kneeling at her shrine to inspiration, for one last time, she tried to deconstruct it; picking out the flamboyant feather pen, using it to dust off the mask

of comedy, then sweeping the whole wreath of crumbling laurel leaves into the upturned face of Thalia, though they fell through the eyes and mouth hole of this classical piece of artifice and back onto the hall table with the same sound as pine needles falling when Christmas is finished.

Then she picked up the lyre and held it uncertainly. Perhaps there was a draught from the doorway, but the instrument played itself. The strings sighed their own music on the strength of a passing breeze, like the Aeolian harp the romantic poets used as a signal of creativity; plucked, strummed or blown by the breath of the divine. Fucked, too, by this force or source, the girl from the attic closed her door to the muse for a while, and tried to work out whether Angela was telling the story of Alison or vice versa; but the translation didn't miss a beat. In approximately the time it takes to have a baby, the authoress was sitting at her desk again; with the symbolic objects installed on her PC.

It was Hermes who invented the lyre. Apollo is famous for playing it, but Hermes made it; out of a tortoise shell with nine strings in honour of the muses. Apollo was their leader, say some, but Hermes was thinking of them when he made his instrument and swapped it with Apollo's; the lyre for the caduceus.

We've been to his temple in a dream; it's still there, in the mountainous region between your world and ours, high as the stars. Lee and Sheela look down on their tiny golden toga saga more benignly than the Olympian demi-gods look upon either your world or ours. And the Muses, whose tortoise-shell chords ring in the original valleys, sing inspiration to proper people, singalos and human beings alike.

This is the point we find out about you. This is the moment we realise that we're not alone, just proper people and singalos, in the beautiful sparkly universe; watched over by beneficent gods we're getting to know better all the time. A help button grew on our computer; and we pressed it. Sorry, you are clearly not made of cardboard and can't all be losers. This is the instant we decide to get in contact with you.

Tune in to the divine inspiration. Choose the channel. But who is invoking who? The voice comes with a slight crackle, fades in as if from far away on the turn of a dial. The tortoiseshell-strung web vibrates to its tone:

"You're going to need a translator."

Now, Look and Sighman's three words are hey, what and wow; all cheered and whooped at once, as the thing they've been trying to fix for ages finally starts to work. From chrome knots in the virtual bark of their computer, comes some verbal blurb:

"Welcome to the ultimate in word processing," it says. "Simultaneous and time-lapse translation a speciality. Shift effortlessly between all known idioms. Switch from literal to metaphorical modes with ease. Deconstruction optional. I am commentator, annotator, paraphraser, code-breaker. Can be used in conjunction with your normal hardware."

"Are you my baby?"

Look and Sighman tut like I've asked a silly question, but the computer kid doesn't seem phased by it.

"Not only that," he says, "but Mercury himself is my godfather and blessed me at my birth."

"Is this what you look like?" I nod at the revolving blue and green orb, lit as a giant dewdrop on the screen's dark web. The globe turns to a musical motif; a 1960s test card tune, a hurdy-gurdy sound. Its paisley design, the surface variegations are constantly shifting; but as we move closer to it, the ceaseless swirling slows down, the colours meet in frozen coastlines, and stiffen into peaks.

"No. These are waves, those are hills," says the voice; "this is surf, that is snow. This is sea, that is land."

I can see the difference between them. The blue substance moves much faster than the green stuff, forming crests and troughs millions of times quicker, as if it were something less substantial. In comparison the pinnacles of green seem to creak and groan upwards in slow motion.

"These are mountains, those are valleys," says the voice, smoothly. "This is a river, that is the sea. This is a current, that is a fish."

A telepathic interruption from Hazel: "It's swimming upstream!"

"The whole thing looks completely unworkable," Juno replies silently.

The commentary from gnarled speakers in the stainless steel bark continues, unabated:

"This is a flower, that is rain. This is a factory, that is a temple. These are apples, those are eggs. This is a diamond, that is an icicle. These mushrooms have grown today, those rocks have been forming for thousands of years."

This might get boring for you. You know it all already. So we'll cut the part where we learn history, geography, biology, art and home economics; everything you found out at school.

The translator teaches us philosophy from the backs of cereal boxes, maths from railway timetables, drama from restaurant menus. It's a good job time doesn't count in Singalo city, because the introduction to your planet lasts forever. And getting to know you personally is a slow process too. No matter how many millions there are, you all live like Hypnos; ringed in by mountains, running a civilization solo; doing everything from goat-roasting to belly-dancing and not enjoying a single moment.

You don't know how high it makes me feel, just thinking about breathing air. You don't know how wet it makes me get, just thinking about jumping into the sea. But you take it so seriously. Cast adrift on a watery planet in rafts of flesh and bone, you're lost in a dream. So numb you think the rain is against you, so dumb you complain when the sun comes out.

The mercurial commentator tells us your worst fears and your best jokes. It recounts the details of every minor quarrel and major scandal. It reconstructs the dialogue of violent fights and passionate sex, the ooh and ah of your most extreme human encounters.

"I don't bend words to prejudice, only bow them to sensibility," it says.

On screen, there are people at parties and in prison, shopping and stealing, working and sleeping. We see fire-stations and swimming-pools, hospitals and discos, oil-rigs and offices. There are people cooking on open fires and in fitted kitchens, squatting on the dusty ground to eat or sitting at polished dining tables. We see people slouched on sofas, staring straight at us through their television screens.

It's not a mirror. You look like clumsy replicas, even to the Singalos. I'd call you robotic, but for the intense surges of emotion streaming through the cord to my baby, the removable device now docked into Sighman's machine.

It's a moment of synchronicity; three proper people and three Singalos, grouped around the circular screen, all with cords of some sort looped into a maypole of communications technology.

"Awesome!" says Alleysun.

"But how does it work?" Sighman asks.

"By mathemetaphorics," says the translator.

"Never heard of it," shrugs Look.

"It's new," says the translator. "Allow me to demonstrate." His background music gives a little trill of excitement.

"Ooh!" shivers the girl from upstairs.

"Please insert your full name," says my high-tech child, and for the first time I feel the cord between us tingle, like it does between live members of a proper family.

"Alleysun Haibun," the singalo says. She reaches up to the glistening web and strums its gossamer strings till the cup 'n' ball letter keys shake; and the ones that spell out her name are illuminated in a neat row on the spider net.

"Translating," says the voice from the speaker. "Alleysun is a shaft of light down a narrow passage. Haibun is the style of writing used by Japanese poet Basho, with poems set in a long piece of prose like jewels in the narrative passage."

We wait for the translator to speak again. For ages, there is a pregnant pause. The screen saver super-novas. We watch it apologetically. Then;

"It's a computer program," says Sighman eventually. "They're not very chatty."

"It probably takes after its father and won't speak until it's spoken to," I add.

"Let's ask it to translate something else," says the singalo girl.

"Like what?" says Look.

"Angela's story," she replies. "Let's turn an angel's tale into the earthly language."

Look scratches his head.

"I want a bit more help first." He turns to Sighman. "Press that button again."

"Can this computer do two things at once?" I ask.

"Mother, when you've known me another page, you'll laugh to think you asked that," the translator says.

So we split into two groups, along radical lines; boys and girls, instead of proper people versus singalos.

Look and Sighman roll up their silky green shirtsleeves and start spinning some platinum beads, laced on the silvery lines of the computer screen, to crack

the codes of its programming. Juno, Hazel and I are intrigued by the idea of translating our story into Earthish. Even though we can't read or write, we feel that we might be able to produce a good book.

"I'll type," says Alleysun, "if you dictate it to me."

*

With a heavenly voice like mine, it's not easy to tell dictation from divine inspiration. But it's her body that produces the first line of text – 'Proper people never cut their umbilical cords' – like the physical thread of a spider. I tell the story but she spins the tale.

There was once a girl called Arachne who boasted she was better at it than the goddess of weaving herself. Athena warned her about showing-off but bold Arachne challenged her to a competition. The girl wasn't wrong, she was the world's best weaver; but the goddess was not of her world. Unable to beat the creator at her original game, Arachne prepared to hang herself with a length of her own silken thread; but in a last-minute twist Athena kindly turned her into a spider so she could still weave beautiful webs. Within this noose of self-reference the story's translation starts; everything you've read so far happened afterwards.

With me and Alleysun, though; goddess and girl, if you like; she's the only one with a loom. After a fashion, a few paragraphs, I start to recognise some of the letters that Alleysun is typing onto the screen, but I can never remember what they mean. There's one character shaped like an angel that she said is A, but I'm Bugged if I reCall what comes next. Dimly, I pick out the poems from the prose as she composes the Japanese-style Haibun; but that's as much as I can distinguish in the literary flow. The calligraphy says nothing about my life; talk to the type-face, the lettering ain't listening.

Luckily, the translator is with us constantly, constructive and critical. He understands the smallest aspects of my work. If only he'd been on hand while I was playing the mating game, there'd have been no problem with underwear, or indeed being without it. Now, as if on a washing-line unfurled, the translator shows us this artefact from every period of earth history; from flannel bloomers to silk boxers they are hung out for our appreciation. Vast drawers to tiny briefs, they're strung out before our fascinated gaze.

It isn't literal, his translation; it can't be, between two unimaginably different worlds. The common ground is mountainside where muses dance, careful not to slip into valleys. But the translator handles each new crisis of interpretation with humour and diplomacy; working so efficiently that my garbled narrative, with events that seem to have occurred in no particular order, is soon ironed out and divided into neat piles of Cause and Effect.

The translator is totally objective, able to see all sides of any argument. But for all his ability to empathise with women's things, he's quite decidedly a man. Instead of having the male/female persona I've come to expect from omniscient beings, he definitely errs on the masculine side. I ask him why. "I'm putting the dick back in dictionary," he replies.

He puts it in my story, too. If the plot were a leopard-skin thong, he'd fill it comfortably, maybe even make the seams strain. But for all his macho pose, the translator translates into a sensitive soul, whose understanding of the devices of poetry shows up as a matching leopard-skin cravat:

Complicated truth
like a tangled knot
untied
provides a lengthy answer
straight as a piece of string.

He spins a rotary washing-line hung with episodes from my real life; exhilarating as a flight with eyes open through clouds of holy smoke. A graduation, a vegetarian barbecue, an exotic holiday, a rock concert; not literally, maybe, but the translation happens word-for-word; an endless day in the life of angels transcribed into earth's language, down to the tiniest detail.

Before we get to the end of our thread, the tale is interrupted though.

"Ange," my mate says urgently, the first time he's called me that, I think. "Our son's not just a poncey poet; he's a scientist, who's made a great discovery. We have connections on other planets! We're kind of attached to those aliens..."

Sighman glistens in the silver light from the screen with the sweat of excitement. Perhaps he looks like any father, proud of his child, no matter that it's

a floppy disk. He tugs his cord, the fine cable connection to the web, till all the branches of the computer tree shake.

"Watch what it can do!" he shouts. "You won't believe this."

On the circular screen we see a race of faces, a procession in rapid succession, a rush of human visages. Though all of them are strange, some of them look familiar. Though each is framed for a fraction of a second, there's time for subliminal recognition. Though each image is still, the series moves with a fluidity in which I can see nothing of the robots I perceived earlier, and something of the animated expressions of us proper people.

And in the separateness of each being, I see Singalos.

Sighman raises his two arms and types frantically for a few moments, flicking electronic leaves and buds high in the boughs. On the screen the luminous letters of my story fade into the fractals of his PC programming. The green and blue planet, the zillion pink and brown and black faces too, have a technicolour clarity that you would call glorious.

Then, other webs appear, strung between other branches of the tree; one higher, one lower, both smaller than the central one, each different in their delicate pixellated patterning. The same picture showing on Sighman's main screen shows hazy on the others, blurry round the edges.

"See that man?" he says. "Who is he?"

"He looks a bit like you," I reply.

My mate's physique, replicated in plastic; but no, Sighman is the one who moves like elastic and glistens like rubber. The man on TV is more wooden. He is sitting on a chair, at a table, holding a knife and fork in his hands and making eating look like an accident with early farm machinery. His every movement is unwieldy.

The real Sighman grabs his remote control and points it quickly at the screen. The scene changes to another lego-built room, this time with nicotine yellow ceiling tiles and a beer brown floor.

There's a guy sitting with one buttock on a bar-stool; a newspaper spread out across a sticky bar, one corner of it dipped in a dirty ashtray.

"Recognise him?" Sighman says.

"Look," I reply. "You can tell it isn't really him though. He looks human."

"Yeah," Look is watching his cameo proudly, "at least he looks human."

Juno shudders beside me.

"Gods know what rubbish he's reading," she says.

"I wish we could understand it," I reply, desperate, now I've nearly written my story, to read more.

"Ask our kid to translate it," says Sighman. "Come here and I'll show you how."

"No," I gasp, "I can't reach the buttons." What I really mean is my fingers can't feel them; my secret shame.

"So, show me how to do it," says Alleysun. She stands on tiptoe in front of the wooden framework, lit up by the criss-cross threads, undaunted by the web.

"Do you like her?" Hazel asks me, telepathically.

"Yes, she's nice. Do you?"

"She's delightful."

Sighman is saying some very singalo things to the girl as they stand together in front of the computer. He is holding her hands and guiding her singalo fingers to certain keys. Between the sturdy beams of this high-tech loom, there's a story told in stitches.

"Goodness me, and she's pretty too," I continue telepathically.

"I just love her," says Hazel, "she's my latest craze."

"Girls, you protest too much," Juno's voice cuts across our praise. "Who are you trying to convince?"

"We think she's darling," says Hazel.

"If I didn't know better..." says Juno.

"We're her biggest fans," I interrupt.

"I'd say you were jealous," says Juno. "If I didn't know that proper people never get jealous, because we're always the best."

"It's translating," shouts the girl from the highest attic.

We look at the web, where a page of newspaper is enlarged, into a giant inky fingerprint; a pet spider for my virtual son.

"Tuesday's weather. Wet and wild," the translator says.

Sighman shakes his head.

"That's been cosmically enhanced," he says. "What's the literal translation?"

“Does the wind think ‘I am blowing’, or ‘I am blown’? The wind doesn’t think at all, says the earth. The earth can’t speak, laughs the water. Does the fire think, ‘I am burning’, or ‘I am burnt’? The fire doesn’t care, tuts the air.”

The translator shrugs as he reads the forecast word by word.

On the screen, the image of Look turns a page of the newspaper to read his stars. The singalo version begins to look embarrassed but he should be proud. With Sighman, he’s discovered a correlation between real people on completely different planets. We're watching a live alien link-up on a circular screen; yours would be square, of course. Scary, but I've seen your sci-fi, from Kirk to the Kraken, and I’ve got a horrible feeling that faced with first contact, you might just kill us. Faced with life from another planet; you wouldn’t, would you; you would, wouldn’t you?

Sighman flicks a switch and changes the subject abruptly.

"And who does she remind you of?" he says.

There's no denying it, a mechanical version of the girl from the attic. We see, through the computer's round window, a completely square room where she sits, on a square chair, at a square table, staring at a square screen.

"What is she doing?" I ask the translator.

"Waiting from inspiration," he replies.

A square box with square buttons, not a curve or a splash of colour anywhere. Every line is straight and white, except for that heart-strung lyre balanced on top of the box.

"It looks so inorganic," I say.

"Most of it is," he replies.

"How can a world survive with so little of it alive?"

"It can't," the translator says. "That's what the Save button is for."

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WWW: three webs are spun, now, between the branches of a computer crossed with a tree. The bark is metal casing, ribbed and riveted to give a naturalistic effect; the leaves are an illusion, caused by the electromagnetic haze in surreal green.

Sighman goes back to the filing cabinet where babies come from and, opening another drawer, pulls out more of the remote controls that attach to singalo wrists with a cord. From a handful of leads and wires, he untangles one root from the weeds, and gives it to Look.

Their glowing gossamer threads are not unlike our own cords, but Look and Sighman's connect them to the hardware rather than anything umbilical. Then Sighman gives one to Alleysun, and shows her how to put it on. He slips it over her hand. He stands behind her and gently steers her hips, ribs, face to face the screen.

"And this will save the world how?"

If my tone is jealous, it's because the greenness of these singalo people is catching.

Sighman flicks a switch on his wrist and indicates that his best friend and the girl from the attic should do the same thing. Each of the three incandescent webs now shows a different scene; the tree becomes a triptych. Three painted grids gradually light up, pixellated with dew drops.

In the central one, the character is still Sighman's. We're in a little blue room, with a frieze of yellow ducklings waddling around the walls, and a mobile cow jumping over the moon.

The human version of Sighman is there, lit by the nightlight, looking into a latticework cot, a rigid rectangular copy of our own baby's concentric net. We can't see the child itself, only a pattern of cotton-tail rabbits, geometrically hopping across the quilt.

"Sickening decor," says Sighman, and Look groans in agreement, but Alleysun sighs and says that it's sweet.

"Watch this," continues Sighman. "He likes straight lines but he can't walk in one."

His man wheels out of the nursery, crashing into a shelf of toys, making a puppet that's hanging from a peg dance a jig on the end of its strings.

"Forward, backward, left and right," says Sighman, demonstrating how to use the control keys on his remote control. They look simple enough, I suppose: arrows pointing up, down and side to side, that even a proper person can understand. "Okay, let's get him out of here."

His fingers fumble, and his character on screen reverses clumsily along the landing. We watch Sighman turn him round just in time to take the stairs head on. At the bottom the man goes into stealth mode, creeping past a closed door with exaggerated footsteps.

"Where are you taking him?" I ask.

"This game; it's like a quest. I'm seeking something," Sighman speaks with difficulty as his man slowly opens the front door. After the warm glow of the nursery, the world outside looks dark and cold.

"He's going to need a coat," Alleysun says.

"No, he'll be alright," says Sighman.

"But maybe they actually feel it," she insists.

Sighman tuts and reverses back into the hallway. He manoeuvres his awkward character toward a coat-stand and waits.

"Don't you have to move his arms?" I ask.

"No, he'll do it himself in a minute," says Sighman.

The character suddenly seems to come alive and puts his coat on quickly, then turns and walks out of the door.

Sighman shouts some instructions over his shoulder, as he steers the human down the garden path.

"Alleysun, Look, get yours going. Flick the switches on your wrists. Use your remote controls."

The other cobwebs come into focus, slung spectacularly between the branches of the computer; fibre-optic candy floss flattened into screens in the forks of the tree. Showing on them are Look and Alleysun's characters in their two dimensional settings; him propping up the bar in a dingy pub, her staring at the screen of her square computer.

The human Look has finished reading his newspaper, having finally got to the front page.

"Escort that gentleman off the premises," Sighman says to his best mate. "Use the direction knobs to move him. You too," he calls to Alleyson. "Steer her out of the current coordinates."

"How do I make her stand up?" asks Alleysun.

"Just shift her in any direction and she'll have to stand up," he replies.

We see the screen girl fall sideways off her chair, roll, crawl and finally stagger to her feet as she rushes out of the door.

"Careful!" says Sighman.

"I'm trying to be," she mutters.

Look isn't faring much better. He's bumped into several people on his way out of the pub, and has been thrown off balance by a couple of punches, making him harder to control. He stumbles into the doorpost and falls to the floor.

"You've knocked him out," says Sighman.

"How do I get him back in," Look cries, slapping and shaking his keypad.

"You can't," says Sighman, "you just have to wait for him to wake up naturally. Watch me," he nods at the original web, where balls are waiting at every crossroad to get lucky with a cup. One is coming with a roll and a rush. "Whoops!" He makes his man step off the kerb into the path of an approaching bus. He manages to swerve out of the way as the brightly lit bus zooms past, tooting.

"Hey," he says to Alleysun, "you were on there!"

"I know," she replies. In her screen we see the bus interior. She's sitting upstairs at the front, pretending to drive; the same thing as us flying with eyes open. "Am I going the right way?"

"I think so," says Sighman, pointing at the web like it's a map of the human city. "See that big green ball, that's what we're aiming for. You're the cup heading toward it at top speed, and I'm the black ball you've just set spinning."

"Which one's Look?" asks Juno.

"It's hard to tell as he's not actually moving at the moment."

"Wake up," mutters Look, punching his forward button repeatedly. On the pavement outside a pub, his little man shakes his head groggily and opens his eyes.

Alleysun's bus is coming up to a junction, and her cup is approaching an intersection on the web.

"If it goes left," she says, "it's going to take me the wrong way."

The bus slows for some traffic lights and starts to turn.

"Oh no!" she says, as it lurches to the left.

"Don't panic," Juno says, "just get off."

"Yes," gasps Alleysun, and launches her human at the flight of stairs, swaying between the double decks of the bus. "Go, go, go!" she shouts, as the

girl tumbles down the tin steps and onto a precarious platform, where the ground scrapes by inches below. "Off, off, off!" she urges, until her character is hanging by one hand from the bus safety rail.

"Wait for it to stop!" cries Juno.

In Alleysun's circular screen a red-faced bus conductor is scolding her as they pull up alongside a bus stop.

"Now get off," says Juno, "calmly back away... don't run! Just slow down or you're going to get her killed."

Alleysun's human stands on the pavement and watches the red bus retreating.

"Can they die?" she asks.

"Let's not find out," Juno replies.

Meanwhile, in another part of the web, the ball that is Look comes to life, and starts slowly rolling towards the big green one.

"Here we go," Look says.

"Is The Big Green Ball another pub?" asks Alleysun.

"No," says Sighman, "it's a hill. Now turn around and walk slowly back the way you came and I'll meet you at those traffic lights."

With a finer touch on the control pad, Alleysun realises, she only has to gently propel her person in the required direction, not try and dictate Alison's every move. There is no need to swerve round obstacles, within reason, for the human being will side-step a lamppost automatically. Use of the sideways button will only result in the character ending up climbing a lamppost on the opposite side of the street. Thus without really trying, the girl skips along the pavement from square to square, avoiding all the cracks; and the boy kicks a crushed drink can into a bin on the street corner; and having met seemingly by chance outside the off-license, the pawns in Alleysun and Sighman's game go the rest of the way to the big green ball together, stopping to look in shop windows.

"Do they know each other already?" I ask.

"We've played games often," Sighman says.

"They certainly seem very close," I reply icily.

There's a telepathic tut from Juno.

"Draw the line at being jealous of humans, Angela," she says.

They walk until the shops stop and there's nothing to buy in the dark hedgerows and silhouette trees, and no one to sell it; but the Alleysun and Sighman characters are still deep in conversation.

"Can we translate what they're talking about?" I ask.

"Later," says Sighman, "there's no time now."

On all three screens the scenes are of dark country roads, with high hedges and overarching trees. He and Alleysun tramp steadily on, but Look's picture wobbles and blurs. His human has borrowed a bicycle and is riding without a light, through the earth-coloured, earth-smelling, earth-cold night.

"It's all coming together," Sighman points up at the web where Look's ball is only a few intersections away, approaching the big green one from the opposite direction. His own ball is rolling towards the same point, with Alleysun's cup making a very cosy but not quite conjoined couple.

We watch in silence while the events on three separate screens gradually merge into one big picture. It's a large wooded area, the foot of a hill. The paths slope steeply up through dense trees and then, at a shadowy junction of beaten tracks, all three people are suddenly in one shot.

They appear to be in shock, jumping around, clutching and punching each other in turn, shouting and screaming and waving their arms about. The coincidence of meeting like this is too much to handle. Then they stand dead still, staring at each other, scratching their heads and tearing their hair out.

"Do they know each other already?" I ask again.

"They're old mates," Look mutters. "But they've never met this way before!"

"Come on, let's go," says Sighman, pressing his forward button.

His man doesn't budge. He points accusingly at Look's character, who is shaking his head in confusion, still a bit drunk. Alison starts to laugh and they both look at her crossly. She is giggling and shrugging and holding her hands out to take theirs. They both cross their arms defensively.

"Try a simultaneous assault," says Juno, "all press your forward buttons together."

"One, two, three, go!" says Sighman.

And they do. Alison races off up the hill, handbag flapping from her elbow. Simon rushes after her. Look's character glances back the way he came, then

saunters unhurriedly after the other two. He must have stashed that stolen bike in the bushes further down.

Near the top of the hill the trees thin out, and the path they are following widens to a grassy ridge. As they walk out of the dark woods, the scene and the screen is awash with a milky glow. Look's angle on the picture pans up to the night sky and comes to rest on the globe of quiet light hanging there. It is a perfect circle, totally still, and once we meet its gaze we never want to tear our eyes away.

"That's the moon," says Look.

"And it's full," adds Sighman.

"Full of what?" I whisper.

"Of itself," says Sighman.

The translator's told us all about this moon, but even though we know how it works it seems shrouded in mystery as it sails, pale and interesting, across the dark sky.

It lends our trio shadows to accompany them over the windswept grass of the hilltop. As they approach a small mound in the centre Sighman signals Look and Alleysun to stop.

"How?" says Alleyson. "We've only got forward and reverse."

"Rock them between the two," replies Sighman; and the figures on the web-shaped screen sit down suddenly on the tuffet. Alison shivers. She's moon bathing, in the colour of curds and whey.

"Now," says Sighman, "increase the brightness."

Look leans forward and twiddles a slender shoot of one of the computer's branches.

"That's as high as it will go," he says.

The glow on the screens has increased, electric blue is sparking pure white.

"Observe," Sighman says over his shoulder to Juno, Hazel and me.

"There's something you can see in the moonlight. The link between us and them."

I stare at the characters on the hilltop, huddled together in heated debate, under the cold sky.

"Please can we hear what they're saying?" I beg Sighman again.

"If listening to them speak will help you see," he sighs, pressing the buttons for simultaneous translation.

"I invoked the Muses, but it took ages because there's nine of them," says the girl sitting on a grassy knoll. "Apparently, there only used to be three; in the days when the art of storytelling was simpler. A trance, a chant, a dance; no call for anything more complex, when a poet was a prophet was a priest was a publicity officer.

"Then suddenly, it seemed the Muses were speaking to me; singing, whispering, not quite words I could hear, but they formed so quickly in my mind and popped so easily onto the page, that I knew this wasn't my own painstaking composition, slow and clumsy with crossings-out. A story started, not quite the one I planned, with such fanciful notions and funny ideas that I knew this wasn't just my own imagination. I could never have thought of it; though it was pouring through my fingertips onto the page.

"But the weirdest thing," she leans forward in the moonlight to show equally white womanly curves, "is that the voices are real; realer than me. The characters seem to think they invented the author.

"You do look a bit pale," is all the boy can say.

"Perhaps if we hold hands," the girl suggests, "it will help substantiate me."

But I see something more portentous than hand-holding between them. Cords, in a shade of blue that we can't usually see; cords that the humans can't see either, though they're joined together by them. Only on this computer screen, and in the moonlight, do the unbelievable, umbilical cords appear.

There, and here in a dim singalo bedroom, when the lunar light shines on Sighman, Look and the girl from the attic, I can see the wispy strings attached to them too. This web is wider than the world. The network is universal; sun, moon and stars, planets and their rings are caught like giant dewdrops in the spider's web of space. The connections stretch beyond anything we've seen in our cup and ball dreams. The sticky thread is stronger than anything spun for an angel's game. Even Apollo's lyre isn't strung with such enduring gut.

"Is it just you," I whisper to Sighman, "or are proper people joined to those on earth too?"

"It's impossible to prove," he replies. "We can't actually attach you to the system with a wristband."

"But Angela's there!" says Juno. "We've seen her on the doorstep, putting the milk bottles out, looking like an angel's alter ego! She lives in the house that you've just tiptoed out of and we could steer you back there to see her again..."

"Yes," says Sighman, "let me explain. The image of Angela is computer generated. I produced it artificially, in order to play the mating game."

Over his shoulder I can still see human him and Alison sitting together on the hilltop, their blue cords matching in the moonlight. My own golden wiring doesn't seem as compatible with his.

"I knew there was no way Angela and I could reproduce naturally," he continues, "so I used the highest technology available to enable us to make a baby. I exported the image of Angela, as it were, into the human world; but I don't know to what extent she is actually there."

I want to go home now. No more of Sighman's silly string theory. I've had enough science and think longingly of art therapy, at the singalo centre, where we took leave of our senses and left our proper bodies in the care of a family of social workers. I've had enough blue, of the spiritual barrier we broke through; now all I want is to return to purple, a place that's familiar, to reassuring red, comforting orange and yellow; our end of the spectrum.

"I want to come too." Hazel reads my mind.

Funnily enough, as we look at the whirling vortex of Look's door, wondering how the dervish we're going to get through it, someone comes through it. Eurydice.

She returns wearing exactly the same facial expression she left with, and it is just as hard to read. But before we can work out what to say, Look addresses her.

"How was work?" he asks.

"Okay," she says, looking at us.

"Were they missing their heavenly helpers?" he says, looking at us too.

"They were all pretty busy with the blue," she replies.

He is about as interested as if she'd said they were knitting and turns back to the computer, where Sighman and Alleysun are preparing to walk their avatars home after the unexpected trip to the hilltop.

"I wish I could remember where I'd left that bike," he says.

Juno, Hazel and I sidle closer to Eurydice. She gives a smile that makes us want to run screaming in the other direction.

"Is everything alright at the day centre?" I manage to ask.

"You have amazing powers," she says. "The magic that proper people do so surpasses singalo technology."

"No one was upset that we'd left?" I stutter.

"They haven't even noticed yet," she says.

"So what was going on?" asks Hazel.

Eurydice lives up to her name, and explains how she's been to hell and back:

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"Worried, I walked quickly to the day centre, wishing I could fly," she says. "I went through the wrought iron gates, through the glass doors into the entrance hall, with a sinking sensation. Not a soul was to be seen. No Dot, no Surely, no Pat Crash: all my charges lost in the blue, sunk without a trace.

"The therapy space looked like an underwater ballroom. Relaxed bodies floated like chiffon gowns, some near the floor, some near the ceiling, some suspended in the middle of the blue expanse. Eyes were shining that didn't see, mouths were open that didn't speak, lifeless arms and legs danced in the gentle current. Coiffures uncurled in elaborate clouds of hair; and only the pearls of necklaces and earrings seemed to glow with the quiet satisfaction of returning to their source.

"If any singalo can live out of their natural element it is me," says Eurydice, "but I was drowning too. Lying on the floor of the ballroom with strings of bubbles escaping from my mouth, like the ghosts of pearls returning to the surface.

"I could feel myself rushing up a dark tunnel towards a brilliant light: a bit like the chandelier on the ceiling, with each tinkling tear-drop the crystal reflection of someone from the waterlogged ballroom who was going the same way. Our tiaras were gleaming like halos. I found myself next to the drowned, gowned version of Dot. She told me a joke that was actually quite funny."

"What was it?" asks Hazel.

"What do you get if you cross the tip of the iceberg?" Eurydice says.

We don't get it, but laugh hysterically anyway.

"Sshhh!" says Sighman, over his shoulder. "I'm trying to hail a taxi."

We turn to look at the computer screen, and Eurydice follows our gaze, to see the game characters walking down a deserted country lane in the dark with their thumbs held out hopefully.

"Hey," she says. "I've been to that place. It's on the other side of blue."

"How did you get there?" Look sounds cynical. He thinks his computer is the only way.

"On the Titanic," says Eurydice.

She stares at the screen, where human versions of Sighman, Look and Alleysun, are waiting at a rickety bus stop in the rain. The boys are shaking their fists at each other and kicking the glass shelter fit to smash it. The girl stamps her foot in a puddle and bursts into tears.

"We've got to do something!" wails the actual girl from upstairs. "I'm going to ask the translator for help."

Before anyone can stop her she darts toward the computer and presses the Help button.

"Hello," says the translator. "How can I help you?"

"It's not us in trouble, but the Earthly ones," she says. "We've got them stranded at a bus stop."

"There's no point them standing there," says the translator, "buses don't run late at night round those parts. The next one won't come till it gets light. Any more questions?"

"Do human beings believe in Lee and Sheela?" I ask abruptly.

This is more up the translator's street. I am sure he is not designed to be used as a public transport timetable. We listen in awe as he cites every single piece of human evidence, from the myths to the maths, of God's existence. He tells us the stories, reads us the religious writings, recounts the miracles, remembers the martyrs. He gives us a crash course, from Torah to Koran, Bible to Bhagavad-Gita. We meet one and many gods, male and female gods; gods you people die for, kill for, to prove they are real, to prove they are truer than the gods of those children you gassed or shot or stoned; but we do not find the names of Lee and Sheela in the vast data-base of my baby's mind.

You've written volumes trying to discover the meaning of life, but the simplest words hold the best clues; it's all in the names of the characters. God is good with an o missing, the Devil is evil with an extra D. Add those two letters together and you've got Do. Do good and you know what God is, do evil and you know the Devil.

But it's easy for me to say this. I've got the help of the ultimate translator. Not only can we translate language into language, say English into French; we can translate language into reality. I don't even have to be able to read and write to translate like this, or be a priestess; though it probably helps to be spiritually experienced. Eurydice is pointing out another mathametaphorical equation, over my shoulder.

"*Je suis* is Jesus with an extra I," she says, "reinforcing the fact that I AM the child of god."

As we stare at the circular screen there is a single puff of smoke, bluey-grey, from the machinery. It drifts between the threads of the web.

Juno, Hazel and I gasp and fall to our knees. Clasp hands, our own or each others, it doesn't matter which because none of them are really there, we begin to pray.

Sighman looks down at us.

"What's up?" he says.

We bow lower, almost flat on the floor.

"The smoke," I intone.

He looks at the wispy stuff winding its way through the gossamer maze before wafting off between the branches of the tree.

"So?" he says, unconcerned. "It gets a bit hot sometimes."

Not for proper people it doesn't. The holy smoke has only appeared once in living memory.

"Don't you understand?" I say, "Something incredible is about to happen."

"No," says Sighman, "it's just overheating."

He turns back to the computer, where he has been manically programming a series of singalo numbers and letters into the keyboard. He presses the last few buttons in the command sequence.

"That should do the trick," he says.

He flicks a switch on his wrist. The scene on the screen shifts back to the bus-stop. The three human characters are sitting in the gutter in the rain, heads in their hands, feet defeated. Suddenly the dark road is lit up by a yellow glow, which grows brighter as the source of the light comes closer. Twin beams. A car is coming over the hill.

Sighman's man leaps to his feet, waving his arms to flag the vehicle down. It skids crazily and screeches to a halt beside him. But instead of being relieved, Sighman and the others don't seem pleased to see their unexpected chauffeur. They're shaking their heads and shouting more than ever. As they clamber slowly into the car's yellow-lit interior we see why they're so upset.

It's me driving. Well, not me exactly, maybe not even a truly human me, but a version that my mate generated on his computer.

She pulls away from the kerb in the crowded car and drives in jerks down the road, engaged in heated debate with her passengers over her shoulder.

"I wish we could understand what she's saying," I say.

Sighman twiddles the knob for simultaneous translation. No point mincing words when you're operating the finest linguist in the universe.

"I don't know," the screen Angela says, before we realise we can now understand her. "I don't know why I came. I just got in the car and drove here."

"But what were you thinking," says her screen mate, "and what have you done with the baby?"

"Your mum's looking after him," she replies. "I just took him round there, said I'd be back in an hour, and drove away. I had no idea where I was going, or why."

"That's ridiculous," says Sighman.

"This whole night has been ridiculous," says the Alleysun character from the back seat of the car; and the singalo girl from the attic nudges Eurydice in glee.

"Look, that's me!" she squeals.

"So, what are you doing out here anyway?" asks the Angela driving along the dark country lane. "And why haven't you got mobile phones?"

"It's a complete mystery," says Alison. "We all left our houses, or rather, Simon and I left our houses and Luke left the pub, for no apparent reason. After what I thought was just a pre-menstrual bus-ride, I bumped into Simon on a street

corner then we walked out of town and walked and walked until we were in the country. We were walking up a hill and suddenly Luke jumped out of the bushes at us."

"What?" Angela crunches the gears in disbelief.

"Quite a coincidence," says Sighman's human. "In the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, who should we bump into but him? And Luke didn't have a clue how he'd got there either. None of us had brought our mobiles; at least, Alison had no credit, and Luke had no charge."

"So, what did you do?" asks Angela.

"We carried on walking up the hill," says the Sighman, "and at the top was the biggest, most beautiful full moon we'd ever seen. We sat there under its spell for ages, even though it was really cold."

"And then we came down again, and were stranded in the rain at the bus stop," says Alison. "But, of all people, you turned up to rescue us, as much in the dark about what you were doing there as we were. It's weird."

"Too weird for me," says Look's man. "Angel, can you drop me off at a pub when we get back to town."

"They'll all be closed," says Simon. "Come back to ours for a drink."

"Can you drop me off at home?" asks Alison. "I need to do some writing."

The one who is me takes her eyes off the road again and turns right round in the driver's seat to reply.

"Not tonight?" she says.

"It's nearly finished," her friend replies.

We've seen a lot of human faces now, a lot of eyes, noses and mouths. It's funny how you've all got the same features, but some of you wear them better than others. I can see that now. You don't all look the same to me any more; I can see cultural differences, family likenesses; I can tell beauty from the beast.

The Alleysun's about a five out of ten, completely average looking; nobody notices she's pretty, nobody notices she isn't. But the humanoid me, well, even the most discerning male would have to award her a ten. Yes, it does imply perfection, and many never give more than a nine and a half in their lifetime. But the Earth me, the Barbie doll version, my computer generated twin, is surely worthy of the name they call her.

"I've got to go that way to his mum's for the baby, anyway," she is saying.

"Angel, concentrate on the driving," her mate insists.

She twists back, leaving the girl in the rear with a view of golden curls.

Alison has grudgingly come to like her rival in love.

"How is the baby, anyway?" she asks.

"He cried real tears this evening," says the human Angela proudly.

Sighman turns it off. At the flick of a switch the picture disappears and the screen reverts to the revolving blue and green planet, humming a peaceful tune.

"Oh, I was enjoying that!" says Alleysun.

"But it was so trivial," says Eurydice. "See how quickly they descended from the hill-top with talk of drinking and driving. The earth is swamped with watery beer and wet babies."

"They're sweet," says Alleysun.

But I'm glad Sighman turned it off when he did. Proud as I am of our USB baby, I still couldn't bear to hear about the functions of an ordinary one. Another puff of smoke appears over the rim of the screen. Juno, Hazel and I glance at each other nervously and say the names of Lee and Sheela three times, telepathically.

"It was drivel," Eurydice continues. "They were so close to seeing their connection to a higher source of power, the moonlight was as bright as it gets; why do they keep missing the link? What can we do to show them they're not alone? How can we send a message to earth, to let them know we're here?"

"Press the Send button," Sighman says.

"Oh!" The singalo prophet didn't realise it could be so easy.

"You mean, we can actually convey a message to them?" says Alleysun.

"We can mail it?" says Look.

"Dispatch it?" says Hazel.

"Transmit it?" says Juno, all in quick succession.

"That is what Send tends to mean," says Sighman.

"Hey," breathes Hazel, "what shall we say?"

"Let's tell them the whole story," says Juno.

"We've got most of it written down already," says Alleysun.

"But who shall we send it to?" says Look.

"Someone who can receive it," insists the pink pantheon. "Not Luke. He's got a laptop that doesn't work. Not Simon. He's got a computer but he only plays games on it. We could send it to Alison. She uses a word processor."

"Ask the translator," says Alleysun. "Can it be done?"

Sighman asks with his fingers on the keyboard of his son; how else to talk to a baby but that? He tickles the dribbling web till it giggles and eight metallic legs shoot tiny balls into every loving cup on the screen.

Sighman's question is in written symbols I can't understand. There is the one that means Angel, and one that reminds me of a pair of your earthly Bosoms or Buttocks; but most of the letters I can't even remember seeing before, though I watched every word of this book being written.

The translator replies in chiming tones; must be the Angel half of him.

"I can text a message from Alleysun Haibun to Alison Habens," he says.

"Then I'd better finish it," says the singalo girl writer, flexing her eight spidery fingers and heading for the keyboard.

"How far have you got?" asks Sighman.

Alleysun scrolls through the long narrative littered with pieces of poetry as far as:

"Complicated truth
Like a tangled knot
Untied
Provides a lengthy answer
Straight as a piece of string"

"Nice one," Look nods.

"Not mine," says Alleysun. "The translator made it up."

"It sounds like the end to me," says Sighman.

"It is nearly," says Alleysun, "I just want to show how the story gets sent to earth."

Sighman is keen to press that button, but forces himself to be patient and fiddles thoughtfully with the cord that attaches him to the computer.

"Make it beautiful, and mysterious," he says. "Don't use too many technical terms."

From my position near the floor, I see her raise a singalo eyebrow at him.

"I couldn't if I wanted to. It's a mystery to me," she says.

Above their heads, another billow of smoke rises. It's bigger than the previous ones and holds its cloud-shape longer in the air. They seem oblivious to it as Alleysun turns back to the keyboard and starts to type. But Juno, Hazel and I begin to chant a prayer, the prayer for the Holy Smoke that proper people learn in case of emergencies, but hardly ever have to use.

Solid gods

We redefine our definition of reality

In relation to you;

You are something we can feel

Liquid gods

We preconceive the concept of truth

In honour of you;

You are something we can drink

Gaseous gods

We redesign our designated space

To be closer to you;

You are something we can breathe

Kneeling on the floor of the singalo bedroom we watch the smoke come down, swirling around the heads and shoulders of Sighman and the others till we can no longer see them.

Like an old-fashioned special effect, a transformation scene with gauze and gaslight, the smoke works its magic. The singalo's heads are round and real as anything but they are blotted out by the curling tendrils of white nothingness. As it comes lower, to the insubstantial outlines of Juno and Hazel's heads, though, it somehow makes them whole; seeping into the pores of our filmy skin and filling the gaps with its physical presence.

And as it drifts right down to the floor, I can see bodies lying all around us; the family of social workers and the assorted inhabitants of the day centre, totally

infused with the smoky glow. Their art therapy just went multi-media. Its very walls have morphed into windows onto the real world; and beyond them, I can see endless groups of proper people, made solid by the smoke.

Kneeling on the next best thing to real knees, all the families I know are visible. I can see the Kennedys, with baby Hahhah at her mother's breast. I can see the Bingens and the Bonifaces, prostrate on the undulating plain; and the Smith family, bowing low like prairie grass, as the smoke sweeps across the tableaux.

Everything that is usually fluid and fleeting, from the features of people's faces to the landscape, is fixed and frozen by the smoke swirling in. Its spiral fingers point out detailed expressions of joy, glee, gratitude and bliss; smoke curls in people's smiles and glimmers in their eyes, it tumbles in ringlets as heads nod and shoulders shiver under the white blanket.

The moistness of the mist conducts telepathy as easily as if it were electricity. My mind is full of other people's words, some coming from further away than the eyes can see. They're praying, chanting, singing glory to god in the highest.

Although it's been what you would call several centuries since the holy smoke last appeared, it only seems like yesterday as all our previous lives pop up in bas-relief, a reincarnation animation, and we recall the people we were when the smoke came before. Age upon age melt into the mist, as we meet ourselves at this juncture.

Everyone I've ever been is lurking in the smoke. Not always a priestess; I've lived as people who never spoke the words of god. Hazel and Juno too have been some right scallywags in their time; people addicted to flying with eyes open, and higher wrong-doings. They are all with us in the smog, as if they'd never died; or as if we are dead already.

But for all this, I am still aware of the singalos gathered around the computer in Look's bedsit; I can see Eurycleia's scuffed shoes on the floor beside me, I can hear Alleysun typing the final paragraphs of the haibun, and even the blue-and-green planet is still visible through the cloud cover, revolving on the screen. It is as if everywhere is here at once. Everyone is meeting at a multi-dimensional crossroads in the fog.

The chorus of chanting increases in volume, the prayer to our solid, liquid and gaseous gods rowdy as a music-hall song as the spotlight plays on the gauzy curtain. Voices reaching higher and lower than our usual register, in chords to accompany a change of consciousness, we wait for someone spectacular to walk out of the pea-souper. But instead Eurycleia steps backwards in her flat brown lace-ups and breaks my concentration. She treads right on me, right in me, stirring the smoke that was showing up my transparent self till it swirls around Look's bedsit again.

"We're about to press the Send button," she says, oblivious to the fact that I'm poised for the second coming. "Watch!"

Through the haze, I can see the computer screen. The scene on it is a flashback to that dim flat, with a human writer waiting for ideas. Alison is in her study, staring into space. There is a table lamp in the shape of a flying saucer on her desk. There are glow-in-the-dark stars on her ceiling. There is a dream-catcher at her window, making cobweb shadows on the floor. There are crystals on a shelf above her head, ready to channel those higher thoughts.

Alison's computer is making a low buzzing sound, but its square screen is blank. Her word processor is ready to begin, but she can't think what to say. She gazes around her room for inspiration, at the cosmic cosmetics on the walls, at the new age accessories on her desk, and picks up a small square packet.

"Is that where she keeps her imagination?" mutters Hazel.

"Probably," I say aloud. "Everything they've got seems to come in boxes. It's so boring there."

"Sssh," says Eurycleia. "Pressing Send."

The single girl poet is reaching out for the button. At the same time, her human counterpart is taking a thin white stick from the packet and putting the brown tip of it between her lips. She sparks a flame with a primitive tool, a wooden match, and sets fire to the end of the short white line.

"Smoke!" I gasp. "She's... self-smoking!" I don't know what else to call it, this trick of making a small amount of holy smoke for your own personal use.

We watch as she inhales deeply, and blows out a ring of smoke which hangs like an idea in the air above her head.

"Eureka!" says Alleysun.

The far away look in the earth girl's eyes seems to come into focus, with a sharp click like the button being pressed. She reaches out to her human keyboard, where rows of letters wait stiff and expressionless, and starts to type.

"It's worked," says Sighman, as we see her fingers moving mechanically over her computer's keys. "She's writing."

Between puffs on her self-smoking stick, Alison translates the muse's tale. Her eyes flicker over the words that appear on the screen, her lips flutter with smiles, her brow with frowns.

Another cloud of intense incense wafts over me. The song of the proper people has reached a high point; it can go no further, it has to turn around. We are no longer singing it, it is singing us. We don't choose the tune; the tune chooses us. And of all the voices we can hear, we can no longer tell which of them is our own.

When Lee and Sheela come out of the mist, it is not in the way you'd imagine. They don't stroll casually into view, small figures we can take in completely with a single glance. Instead, with a sudden upsurge, columns start to rise; the legs of a colossus that make the pillars of my church look like matchsticks. With a great thrust the smoke shoots upwards, and we go with it; all of us, not watching from a distance, but actually inside it. As the smoke makes the shape of the ultimate beings we each form a particle of them.

The rush is incredible, almost more than our individual souls can bear. I see the singalos from the day centre swept away by it, swooning on the smoky air-waves. The cords hold between me, my mother and my sister; but I lose touch with their minds in the struggle to keep a grip on my own awareness.

We are all caught up in the rising, Kennedys and Smiths alike, racing in the hollow legs that keep growing. We fill the outline of ankles, the sheer face of shins, the curve of calves. Higher than could ever be measured we gush, straight up; a stream of people slowing to negotiate the bend of knees. Into the thighs we surge, going like a steam engine, not choosing whether to take the left or right; nothing is this pointed, no one is that independent, in the smoke. There are no signposts: the whole thing is a sign.

And then we come to a crux. The cloud divides; the smoke and the folk go in different directions. We flow into a pair of torsos, towering trunks. Juno, Hazel

and I have entered the male one, we fill out the bumps and bulges of its muscular structure; but we see other families swirling into the soft breasts of the other smoke filled balloon, with nipples like rubber bungs.

It is sacrilege to describe Lee and Sheela as giant inflatables. Even though they are our King and Queen, it seems wrong to describe them as a bouncy castle. We'll leave that temple to Venus; and see them, instead, as a paired palace made from millions of proper people. Each one of us is a spiritual building block, row upon row making the ornate elevations of the beautiful châteaux we can only see when we're in it. A religion raised by soul bricks; only visible from within.

From our place in the chest wall, the muscles closest to Lee's heart, we can look down upon the legs; three of them, one male, one female, and one in between. Our godparents are like conjoined twins, fused at the crutch, making them neither Him nor Her but both; the nuclear fusion producing a family reaction.

From our place at Lee's pecs, we see people gush past us into the arm, reaching the fingertips with the force of thunderbolts. We can't talk, just stare at each other in the smoky atmosphere. Then I see Hazel looking at something in my hand; her eyes signal a warning.

I am holding Eurycleia by her scruffy brown shoe-laces, having accidentally dragged the poor singalo girl into the smoke. I let go of her in shock. She drifts for a second, completely at the mercy of the sublime, then is sucked abruptly into the current, into the swirl of souls heading straight for god's head. I try to snatch her back. She's the only singalo in sight now, surely this high exposure to the almighty can't be right. The others, Sighman and Alleysun, are still playing around with Look's computer, totally unaware of the magic going on behind them.

Eurycleia swims straight for the hole to god's head. If she's not careful, she's going to end up immortal. Proper people can withstand the holy gas, but singalo bodies could be preserved by it, like in the legends of the ones who got caught the first time. As we watch, Eurycleia swirls with the smoke into the narrow passageway that is Lee's neck until only her legs are visible, kicking in her clumsy shoes. I try to follow, to catch the sensible laces; but the bond that joins me to the pink pantheon is not as strong as the cords between Juno, Hazel and I. They

don't let me go; and Eurycleia spirals off into a trace of herself, a wave in god's brain.

I look up at Lee's face, and even from this funny angle, viewed from within him, even in smoky cross-section, his omniscience is clear. How else could he be all knowing, but by thinking with everyone's thoughts. It's a revelation for me; but quick as a single intake of breath, and a speedy exhalation, it's all over. As suddenly as we entered god's immortal form, we are leaving again; breathed out of the body with no regard for our own physical beings, expelled from its hallowed chambers, bounced off the walls. From cavities and passages the people pour, coughed out with the smoke from the lungs of the divine, cleared out of the head, flexed out of the arms, shaken out of the legs; farted out of the celestial arse.

As fast as breathing in and out, just once, though it seems to last much longer, our meeting with their majesties is over, and we make our way out of the prototype bodies, the pattern by which other beings are made. Proper people, singalos and even humans, though different as chalk and cheese and cucumber, are all inspired by these basic principles, though only the gods are close enough to share an extra leg. We leave via their mystic limb; backwards, bowing, wishing we didn't have to go at all.

Unceremoniously, we are dumped back where we started, the last wafts of smoke curling towards the ceiling. After the high, it's like coming down to earth; though obviously it isn't earth we come down to. We are back in Look's bedsit, and the singalo day room. As the mist clears I become aware of both venues simultaneously, though my attention is snatched by the art therapy, where something terrible is happening.

The singalos we left singing in the blue are shouting and screaming. The fragile bodies we left relaxed and happy on the floor are bruised and battered as if they'd been bounced off the walls. The singalos that were nearly cured are really distressed again.

The family of social workers are moving amongst the casualties on their hands and knees, administering what little aid they can to the singalos suffering from smoke damage.

"Hazel, help us," they plead.

We look at the broken body of Surely Valiumtime. She is trying to speak, between sobs.

"Hush," says Hazel, holding her hopelessly insubstantial fingers to Surely's lips.

I look desperately over my shoulder at Eurycleia, who is staggering to her feet in Look's bedsit.

"Can you do anything?" I ask.

Though looking shaken herself, she nods her head, puts on her coat, and leaves the room by the spinning vortex of a door. Since the last time we saw her she was squeezing up the bottleneck to god's head, this girl looks supercool.

It takes what you would call about ten minutes for her to turn up at the day centre. Meanwhile we have been unable to comfort the screaming singalos. We cannot give them a cuddle for fear of distressing them further; after their smoke inhalation, the burning sensation of a proper person's touch could be the final straw. Even the social workers can only offer them verbal support.

Eurycleia comes through the double doors and takes off her coat. Her arrival causes a lull in the ululations. She gets to her knees in the circle of singalos and holds out her arms to envelop them all in one big hug. They crawl into her embrace, and the sniffing and the coughing and the crying slowly subside. Sitting on the floor with Surely's head on one shoulder, Dot's on the other, and Pat Crash's in her lap, she rocks gently. My mother, my sister and I are mesmerised by the singalo girl's healing powers. It seems that proper people aren't the best at everything. When physical comfort is called for, we're completely inadequate.

As the residents of the singalo centre quieten down, we become aware of another uproar. This is coming from the ones still huddled around the computer in Look's room.

"It's not working properly," says Alleysun. "The smoke must have got into it."

"Don't be silly," says Sighman, "let me see."

The picture on the circular screen shows Alison still typing the story of my life; chipping away at her own square screen like a sculptress facing a hunk of stone.

"She's got to the bit where the Kennedy baby is born," says Alleysun.

"Hahhah?" I say.

Before she can reply, the translator's voice comes sadly from the loud speaker.

"Malfunction..." it says.

"What kind of malfunction?" asks Sighman.

"Mathemetaphorical error," the translator replies, in a tearful tone. If I didn't know my baby was a removable device I'd swear its bottom lip was quivering.

"Explain," says Sighman.

There comes a sob from the speaker.

"Why doesn't daughter rhyme with laughter?" the translator says. "How come daughter rhymes with slaughter, which is a nasty thing; but not with laughter, which is a nice thing. Don't they love their little girl?"

"Of course they do, dear," I falter.

"See!" Alleysun stabs her singalo finger at the screen. "It's not translating properly. In that version, the baby is called Hannah."

I peer at the tiny line of print appearing on the human computer, a miniscule sentence on the screen within a screen.

"How can you read that?" I ask in awe. "You must have picked up the language incredibly quickly."

"Well, I have a way with words," she says. "Just like Sighman has a head for numbers."

I see how she looks at him, sideways, shyly, as if he were her mate instead of mine. He, however, is oblivious to both of us; frowning and fiddling with the computer's connections.

"I don't understand what your problem is," he says, flicking a few switches.

"A is for Apple," replies the translator, and a picture of the original fruit appears on the screen, round and red and revolving like a planet.

Sighman swears. Singalo swearing is unmistakable, but I can't begin to tell you what it means. And I don't like to ask the translator to consider something so offensive to the ears, especially when he's feeling fragile.

"A is for Apple," he says again, in a small voice.

"Come on," Sighman presses buttons angrily, "stop playing around. We know the alphabet."

I don't. I start to bristle on behalf of illiteracy; but more pressingly, I am overwhelmed by the urge to protect my child. I suppose you could abbreviate it to

UPC. It courses through the cord that attaches me to the tree, filling me with raw power.

"Shhh," I say to Sighman, my tone designed to remind him exactly who's proper and who's a singalo here. "Be patient. The translator is only a baby."

"He's a memory stick," Sighman replies.

"Did we, or did we not," I hiss, "conceive him together in the act of love? It may have been computer assisted, but he grew in my womb and was born by my labour in the normal way. It's true isn't it," I say to the place where my umbilical cord ends, with the USB port embedded in a branch of singalo hardware, "you are our child."

"Yes," the translator replies, "but not a normal one. I know too much." As he says these words a new image appears on the screen. The ripe apple is still revolving on one of the webs, slowly and sedately, the symbol of wisdom, the size of a planet; but now alongside it a partner spins. This second orb has identical proportions, but different markings: it is mostly white, with fine red veins on one side, and on the other, a black pupil ringed by a greeny blue iris. It is a giant eyeball.

"See," says the translator, highlighting first the eyeball then the apple. "EYE. KNOW. I know too much for an ordinary child."

"Nonsense," I say gently. "Look at it the other way round. APPLE. EYE. You are the apple of my eye. An extraordinary child."

The vortex door bangs behind us, and we all turn to see Eumalia back from the day centre. She shrugs off her tatty black coat, and throws it onto a chair.

"Is everything alright there?" asks my sister quietly.

Eumalia nods once, refusing to part her tightly shut lips.

"We should get back to work," Hazel says to me and mum.

"Can't we just stay till the end of the story?" I ask her.

"And then go back?" Juno adds.

Eumalia opens her mouth and smoke comes out.

"You can't go back," she says, "ever." With every word smoke billows into the room, a puff of smoke for each syllable.

We're stunned into silence; not so much by what she says at first, as the way she says it. The smoke pouring from her throat makes it sound like Lee and Sheela are speaking;

"I'm a fast walker but it takes me some time to get between here and work, two places that you are gracing simultaneously."

We still can't reply.

"You've straddled the boundary between two dimensions, and lost your spatial elasticity," she says.

"It's temporary," says Juno. "We had to come for the sake of Angela's baby."

"But proper people aren't supposed to visit Singalo City at all," says the singalo prophet, smoke still curling from her lips with every word. "The day centre is the place to interface with angels, not some bedsit in the centre of town."

"Well, never mind, we'll leave at once," I stammer.

"You can't," she says with another puff. "You've overstretched your spiritual thread. Otherwise, you should feel dizzy, so close to us, and we would spontaneously combust."

"But I had to mate with Sighman," I say. "I received a Maternity Message."

"He was born a proper person," Eumalia breathes fire at him too. "You've both come too far into the city."

"What if I promise to return to the Real World and never have anything to do with singalos again," I gasp, "except in art therapy sessions."

"You can't go back!" Eumalia roars. "You've spoilt everything there. Saying the name of the third god is Angela!"

"That's what you told me," I protest.

"You weren't listening properly," she replies.

"I'm telepathic," I snap. "I don't usually have to listen at all."

She gives me a dragon-eyed glare.

"I just repeated the words you said to me," I insist.

"But they only work," she whispers, "when you tell one person at a time."

"Proper people can't keep secrets," I say. "If one of us knows something, we all find out eventually."

Eumalia exhales slowly. The smoke seems cold now, visible breath on a winter's morning.

"After I inched my way up your ridiculously long aisle..."

"How did you do that anyway?" I interrupt, transparent arms folded defensively across my chest. "How come you haven't lost your spiritual elasticity?"

"Because I'm different, Angela," she says. "I was there at the last smoke."

Although she addresses me specifically, my whole family step back in amazement.

"Yes," says Eumalia, "the myths are true. It does make us immortal. My body's going to live as long as my soul. Though I think my shoes will wear out soon."

"How many singalos saw the last smoke?"

"Not as many as this time. Your entire art therapy group have just become eternal," she says to Hazel.

"So her job at the day centre is still on?" I ask hopefully.

Eumalia gives me a knowing look.

"You can't go back," she says again.

I panic now.

"You can't stop us," I cry.

"I don't need to," she replies. "How do you think you're going to get there?"

I look around wildly, and wave my arms in the singalo centre; the walls of the therapy room still surround us.

"We're there already," I say.

"And you're still here," she adds, in Look's bedsit.

"But... but..." I stutter.

"You're stuck betwixt and between," Eumalia says.

"No," I insist, "we can fly through the day centre's double doors and back to the real world."

"There are two sides to that building," she argues, "and two exits, even though they both look the same. You've crossed the borderline to the singalo city side, and if you try to leave now, that's all you'll find."

I stare at her in horror. It can't possibly be true. Not to return to our nowhere land, the nothingness of home; not to be in the emptiness of our endless blissful haze?

"It'll be no life for you," she says. "You might as well be dead."

"Dead?" I scream. "All three of us? Juno and Hazel too? Why must they die for my mistake? Help!"

"I don't think that button will work, now," mutters Sighman, in the background.

Some mate he turned out to be, still messing around with his computer when my death sentence has been passed. I appeal to our makers, the godparents on high.

"Save us," I plead, holding Juno and Hazel's hands tight, raising them to the ceiling, a triple supplication. "Please, save us."

"I'll try that button, then," says Sighman.

He presses Save with his singalo finger. The room is suddenly full of ringing bells; alarm clocks, ambulance sirens, funeral knells come from the speakers. In the cacophony, the translator's voice sounds clear and calm.

"Hello. How can I save you?" it says.

Sighman clears his throat.

"Angela and her family are stuck in Singalo City," he says. "They've overstretched themselves, and can't return to the Real World. Is there anything you can do for them?" asks Sighman.

"I can save them onto hard disk," the translator replies.

Sighman frowns until his green eyes disappear.

"Is that the only way?" he asks.

"Yes," says the computer.

Sighman covers his face with his hands, and kneads it like modelling clay.

"What does 'saving us onto hard disk' entail?" I ask.

The image on the computer changes. Now, alongside the giant eyeball and apple revolving in space, the blue and green planet reappears on the third web screen. Equally enormous, the three of them rotate together at the same pace.

"You have to go to Earth," says the translator.

"We what?" I gasp.

"You can't stay here," says Eumalia, but there's no more anger in her voice, and no more smoke coming from her mouth.

"You have to go and live on Earth," says the translator.

I stare at Juno and Hazel in silence. They've never looked so invisible.

"I will translate you into human form," the voice from the speaker says.

I manage to speak for all three of us, a tiny squeak.

"We can't go there; we can't do that. We're proper people."

"Well, they're not exactly animals," the translator replies.

"But... but... we're god's children," I protest.

"So are they," Eumalia laughs.

"The same god, though?"

"Of course the same gods," she says. "For a priestess, you have very little faith."

"The computer will generate some bodies," says the translator, "and install your souls into flesh and blood versions of yourselves, if you decide to be saved."

"Angela's got a body down there already," says Sighman.

"It's going to need a bit of modification," says the translator.

"Why?" I ask, indignantly.

"Because you're an angel," says the translator, "You can't just go on as you are. You'll give the game away."

"So what are you going to do to me?" I say.

"I think it'll be best for you to undergo a lorry. Watch this."

On the screen, the eyeball clears to reveal a picture. It's the night of the full moon and the human Angela has just dropped Alison off at home after their trip to the woods. With Luke in the back seat, and Simon beside her, she sets off to pick up their baby. The scene is still switched to simultaneous translation.

"I bet Alison will be up all night writing," says Luke. "She says we can read it soon."

"I'd sooner be gazing at the full moon." Seems like Angel hates reading as much as me.

"Careful, darling," says Simon.

"What?" she laughs.

"You're driving like a lunatic!"

That's the last thing we hear, except for the crash, and the crunching and twisting and screaming of metal, which sounds the same in any language. Then we see silent pictures of the car, which Angel effectively drove under the wheels of a lorry; and an ambulance rushing her to hospital.

The scene shifts from one of the three web-shaped screens, strung like life support between the branches of a tree, to another. The one with the eyeball goes blank and the story continues on the screen that showed the revolving apple.

In a sterile, echoing corridor, we catch the conversation between Luke and Simon, who miraculously escaped the accident unhurt.

"Brain damage," Simon whispers. "They say she may regain her motor skills, but she'll never recover her speech."

"I'm so sorry," Luke replies. "I shouldn't have tried to talk to her while she was driving."

"Mate, it's not your fault," Simon turns away, a tragic movement. "I should have realised she was too good for this world."

Through the porthole of a hospital door, we see my human body lying in bed, linked to high-tech heart-beating machinery by tubes and wires. A luminous, pulsing cord which would show anyone 'in the know' my true, angelic nature. The picture freezes.

Everyone in Look's room is looking at me, mostly with single eyes; but Juno and Hazel are searching my soul from the inside.

"Could you live like that?" Juno asks me.

"It would depend what happened to you and Hazel," I reply. If they were unhappy, I wouldn't want to live at all.

"So, who could you transform us into?" Mum asks her memory stick grandson.

"Anyone, so long as they don't speak," he replies. "We can't have you telling tales."

How could Juno, teacher supreme, work without language skills? How could Hazel, artist and singer, work without words? The translator offers a few suggestions.

"A nun?" he says. "Sworn to silence."

My sister shakes her head.

"I'm an atheist from now on."

"A bird then?" the translator says. "So you can fly with your eyes open all the time."

Hazel looks more tempted by this, but stops and bites her lip.

"I want to be with my sister," she says. "Can't we stay together somehow?"

The translator doesn't reply at once, though a green light winks on every electronic leaf of the computer tree, to show he's working on it. After a pause he says, "How about this, then?"

The spinning planet on the screen gives way to an image transmitted from Earth. Neutral fixtures, institutional fittings; we recognise this location. It's the place we used as a metaphor for the Distressed Singalo Centre throughout my story.

It's a day room for the disabled. The first person we see there is Angela. She's sitting in an armchair by a window. We can tell it's after her car accident, because her eyes are looking in two different directions. One is gazing out at a garden. The other is fixed on Hazel.

Hazel is sitting at a table. She's a funny looking thing, even for a human being, but there's a smile on her face. She's holding a crayon in her misshapen fingers. Blue, it is. And on the piece of paper in front of her, she's drawing a rainbow.

She's already coloured in the red curve, the orange, the yellow and green. She's coloured hundreds of rainbows before. They're plastered over the hospital walls. It's all she does, day in, day out; colouring rainbows, and singing.

Hazel puts down the blue crayon and picks up the indigo, and the pitch of her song gets higher. For someone with such a profound mental handicap she has a good grasp of the rudiments of music. She seems to know intuitively how the seven colours of the rainbow relate to the seven notes of the major scale, though she doesn't even know her own name.

As her chunky fingers fumble for the violet crayon, her keening hits the highest note of all. She raises her eyes to the Angela, in an armchair in the corner of the ward, and a look passes between them; a knowing look that intrigues the nurses who sit, drinking tea and reading, at the reception desk.

"I would swear," says one nurse to the other, "that even though those two can't talk, they are somehow communicating."

The picture freezes as the Earth on the screen stops turning.

"That'll do," says Hazel. "I'll be her."

My lovely sister, reduced to deformed flesh and blood because of my arrogance.

"I wish I could cry," I say.

"You will when you get there," Eumalia replies.

"Is it like a dream then?"

"It's like being lost in a dream."

"Will we ever wake up again?"

"You will when you die," she says.

"So, might we," Juno inquires politely, "be able to come back to the real world afterwards?"

"Grandma," the translator says to her, "don't jump the gun. I need to know who you're going to be, down below, as it were."

"Pardon?" says Juno.

"Do you fancy the nun?" he says. "We could make you a mother superior."

"No thank you," says Juno, "I've got a better idea. Don't give me a body at all. Just save my soul."

"But you'd be invisible," says the translator.

"I want to stay with my daughters," says Juno. "The three of us must live together."

"You'd be a ghost," says the translator.

"A guardian angel," Mum smiles.

"They wouldn't know you were there," the translator says.

"So I'd find some way of showing them," Mum shrugs.

"Mystic messages!" says Eumalia. "You could make signs in their tea-leaves."

"Do what?" says Juno.

"Oh yes," the translator gushes; "the food and drink is quite delicious and you can have as much of it as you like but there is, by all accounts, nothing nicer than a cup of tea."

"A cup of T?" says Alleysun.

"Yes. T for Translator," the voice from the speaker trickles. "Drink it in remembrance of me."

On all three screens now a new picture appears. We see it in the iris of the eyeball, the peel of the apple, ringed by the planet. It's the same room that mine and Hazel's new lives are in. The fallen angel is still sitting in the institutional

armchair. The same nurses are drinking tea. The handicapped artist is drawing the same rainbows. She doesn't look up as my visitors arrive.

Simon comes into the scene with a little boy who's walking and talking, and propels him gently towards Angel in her armchair. Simon used to work at this hospital; now he is strictly a visitor. Following behind the man and toddler is the girl who used to live upstairs. Alison has moved in with Simon since the accident, but helping him with the childcare hasn't stopped her writing a best-selling novel. We can actually see a copy of it on the nurses' desk. They didn't buy it; the author gave it to them.

And we can see Juno, too, though no one else on screen seems to. Still in her proper form, in the room of dingy white walls and dirty windows, ugly furniture and vile curtains, her beauty is unbelievable. She looks exactly as she does now, pure energy, radiating love. She is everywhere in the room at once, but specially at the shoulders of Angela and Hazel.

"You look spectacular," Sighman says, respectfully.

"But they can't see me," whispers Juno.

"Give them a sign," says Eumalia.

"That's not really allowed," says the translator.

"I think it's the least she can do." The singalo prophet coughs up a final lungful of smoke. "That family foiled my plans to spread the word to all proper people. This is a last chance to pass the message on; please, send some evangelical mail."

On all three screens, the angel that only we can see, our mother, lifts her arm in a glorious arc with after-images following its ghostly curve and thrusts her golden finger into the hospital teacup. It rattles slightly as the sibylline message is made in the leaves.

"Sighman, you did that without pressing any buttons," says Alleysun.

He holds up his singalo hands in a gesture of confession.

"I am not in sole control of this thing," he replies.

The translator chuckles.

"So, shall I save you?" it asks us.

I still can't cry, but at these words I howl in despair. What pitiful rescue remedy am I offering our poor trio? The more hysterical I become, the more my mum and sister are stoical about the situation, though. If one of them had

screwed up, if it were Juno or Hazel's fault we were coming your way, I'd be cheerfully trying to accept the challenge of life on Earth too, I suppose.

"I'm sorry for the mess I've got you into," I moan.

Even the singalos are trying to console me now.

"It'll be fine," says Alleysun, "I'll make sure your story gets finished. I'll send it safely after you."

This is no consolation.

"I don't want to go..." I cry.

"What else did you have planned, Angela?" says Juno. "To stay in the Real World for ever? You've always been different, before you mated with a singalo."

"But what about you two?" I wail.

"We're alright," she says. "Always wanted to travel..."

"But it's such a long way!"

"No it isn't," says the translator.

"What?" I'm arrested mid-whine.

"It isn't a long way," says the translator. "It's here."

"Where?"

"Here."

"Where?"

"Your perception of reality depends how thick you are, how slow you're vibrating, how solid your matter. Whether you see the real world, or singalo city or earth depends how physical your eyeballs are." The voice from the speaker sounds frustrated. "There isn't any other way to translate it."

"So we're there already?" I snap.

"I wish you were," he snipes back.

"I think a certain baby is ready for bed," I say.

"On the contrary," he says; "it's time to say your own bye-byes. So, are you ladies ready to be saved onto the hard disk?"

I guess from what Juno has just said she doesn't mind going too much, but how does Hazel feel? She'll never get the urge to reproduce now. I turn to my soul sister, a look of sorrow on both my outward and inward faces.

"Angela," she tells me telepathically, "there'll be music there. There'll be art. There'll be me, you and Juno. That's all I've ever had anyway. Let's just think of it as a long, long dream."

Her voice is so calm and peaceful, that I start to feel sleepy. I blink at the singalos gathered around the computer, blue in the light from the screen, clear of all smoke now. I look at Eumalia and Alleysun, the prophet and the poet; at Look, the pioneering scientist and player of games; and at Sighman, my green-eyed match.

Singalo mate, father of my child; winner of my salvation, such as it is. The timelessness we've shared is full of still images, an embroidered montage. I see him as he's appeared in my dreams; Aladdin in a jewel cave, a body floating in a swimming pool, Santa at the snowy cottage door. And all those moments from the mating game; the Christmas Party, the meal in a Fancy Restaurant, the Holiday in Venice. I see him in countless art therapy sessions, pogoing in the privacy of his own room, engaging with his software son.

"Goodbye," I say to him.

"Goodbye," he replies. "We'll be watching you."

"I'd rather you didn't," I say stiffly. "Anyway, it looks as though it's going to be very boring."

"Human beings do have a rich inner life, apparently," he says.

"It'll have to be priceless," I say.

"You're priceless." He takes a singalo step towards me, away from the computer so the cord that attaches him tightens. I suppose this makes our relationship official; we're both joined to the bloody thing by a string. "Even when you're ignoring me your proximity is the perfect company," he says, "and when you actually pay me attention the effect is almost too powerful."

"It's a good job you're not telepathic," I smirk.

"I am," he says.

"You're not," I gasp.

"I was born a proper person," he says.

"I know that, I just didn't think..." I break off in horror, thinking of all the unspeakable things my family have said about him.

"I never act on anything I find out telepathically," he insists.

"But how come we don't pick up your transmissions?" asks Juno.

"Because," says Sighman, looking at me, "the only words I ever emit on that frequency are I love you I love you I love you."

"Oh!" I say.

"Can't you hear it?"

"Well, now that you come to mention it..."

I can hardly believe it. Sighman's been telepathic all along? I test him, sending a few silent words through the air. He smiles as he catches them. He is practically knocked out by his own grin.

"What did I say, then?" I ask him aloud.

"Crazy about you, peach-cheeks," he whispers.

He takes another step towards me, but the cord that attaches him to the computer is fully taut, and he can't come any closer without unclipping himself. I hold up my hand to stop him.

"Stay," I say, "physically linked to our baby. And when I've been earthed, remember that you're an angel too."

He nods.

"Anything else?" he asks.

"Say goodbye to the Kennedys for me," I say.

"And the Smiths," says Juno.

"And the social workers," says Hazel.

"If you get the chance," I say, turning to Eumalia, "set things straight with my congregation. It might not be too late. Have a word with the Bingens and the Bonifaces. Say the name of the third god is them, not me."

"The element of surprise has been lost," she says.

"But you've still got the enduring truth of the theory," I persuade her.

"No, I'm putting my trust in the tea-leaves now," she says.

We all turn and look at the screen. On the revolving blue and green planet, Juno's golden finger is still penetrating a white china teacup in the day room of the hospital. Her ghostly digit of light conducts our awareness to the centre of the scene, to the table where the human Hazel sits and sings.

"How do we actually get into the picture?" I ask Sighman.

The translator gives him a series of instructions, highly technical terms; something that you would call a telephone number. He presses a sequence of buttons, making a tune slightly less discordant than my sister's singing.

"Now press save," says the translator.

"It's as simple as that?" says Sighman.

"It's simple for you," says the translator.

"Are you ready?" Sighman asks us.

Juno, Hazel and I look at each other, pointless really as we are all one, but seeing the others is like having a photograph; something to remember this moment by.

"How about a prayer," I suggest.

"Go on then," says Juno, "quickly."

"But no," I add slowly, "let's not pray. Let's not chant or sing. Let's be silent, and hope that our actions speak louder."

"It is a far greater thing we do now..." says Hazel.

"No telepathy, no nothing," I interrupt, looking round at everyone. "Not a word. Keep mum, shtum, hmm?"

"Shut the fuck up," the translator says.

On the three web-shaped screens, the blue and green planet, the apple and the eye revolve in quiet alignment. So my mother, my sister and I stand side by side, waiting for the pull to begin.

Cheek to cheek to cheek, they press on either side of me as I become the centre of the family, gathered by the cord that joins me to the computer, my other umbilical cord.

All the way through this story, I've said we have no time. From the very beginning I've insisted that the treacle you are wading through doesn't touch our winged feet; that we stick only to the speed of flight.

Now that we are waiting to leave our real world and enter yours, the mode of travel needs to be different. Your planet is not in outer space any more than ours is. As the translator says, they are both here; both in the same place. To conclude our story we must make a journey: not through space but through the passage of time.

Ours is the broad end of the temporal spectrum. Time is at its loosest here. But looking down that tunnel like a telescope, things at your end seem to come to a very tight point. Years, months and days are numbered precisely: 22.05.09. I suppose you could call it my birthday.

When I can't wait for this a moment longer, Sighman presses the button to save our souls. With a drumming of white horse hooves, a flash of shining armour, a swish of velvet cloaks, we are swept off our feet. Only for a knight we swoon in his saving embrace then he shoves us off the back of his galloping steed.

We land at the rim of the tunnel of time and baulk at the entrance. I don't know which one starts it, but all three of us are trying to stop falling in, six hands clutching at the cord joining me to my computerised son, the translation software. We're getting drawn into the umbilical link; its walls, metallic and bloody, pulse invitingly. The combined will of mother, sister and me is powerful though and we cling to the edge of time, refusing to go with the flow.

The initial urgency drains away, as if our chance to surf the fateful current and join the human race is over. Now that we've missed it we drift aimlessly, just inside the lip of the tunnel.

"We resisted the urge to be reproduced," Juno says.

"It wasn't very powerful," Hazel replies.

But as we float in this amniotic channel the call to earth is more subtle. The cords between us seem to lose their strength; a pull is felt from the planet where we'll be separate. I feel the need to stand on my own two feet; indeed, real legs are growing in place of the faint outlines I've been making do with until now. Arms are budding on either side of my body, where Juno and Hazel have been my right hand women. And I'm finally starting to get what you would call a head on my shoulders.

We're waiting, gestating, until the passage seems like a terrible squeeze. The embryonic state becomes unbearable; the walls are too tight, we struggle for elbow room. The tension is relieved by a voice that corkscrews through time, popping it like a celebratory bottle of champagne to wet my baby head.

It's Euterpe, my muse, having the last word; but it's something I said to her first.

"Stop fighting," she says. "Surrender, and let yourselves be sucked in."

We surrender, and get sucked in.

When we've disappeared, after a respectable pause, Alleysun turns to Sighman.

"I must finish writing that haibun," she says, "and send the end."

"Yes," says Sighman, and turns to look longingly at the screen. "I wonder if there'll be one last instalment."

Things are looking uneventful in the earth-shaped picture. Hazel is still drawing rainbows at the table, Angel is still sitting in the armchair by the window with Simon at her right hand and the unseen Juno at her left. Her son, who can't remember what his mum was like before the accident, is playing happily on the day-room computer.

The nurses are nearing the end of the novel, and Alison Habens is working out what to say when they ask her where she got her ideas from.

From Polyhymnia, muse of the sublime and sacred song; or Erato, muse of the erotic? Because she knows she didn't make the whole story up herself. The epic poets, the ancient philosophers, knew it too; prophets, sibyls and spinners all heard the whisper of unseen speakers behind their inspired words.

"I had help," Alison tries to explain. "Someone would always send me the next line, and save me the best ending." She looks from the nurses to the patient Angela sitting silently in the corner. When the staff ask her for her autograph, on the fly leaf of the book, she signs only a letter A: the one that looks like an angel.

There's a rude shriek in the singalo bedsit.

"Guess who's just turned up!" Look gives a raucous laugh.

The others look on the global screen for a late arrival; but the apple screen next to it, which has a slightly different angle on the scene, shows someone new coming into view.

The Pink Pantheon is wearing a hospital uniform; but of all the human versions of themselves that the singalos have seen she's the one who retains the most of her real presence. Dressed in a nylon overall and a starched hat she looks hilarious. Nevertheless it is with great dignity that she wheels her trolley down the corridor and into the ward and utters the words:

"Tea break."

Everyone greets her by name; but how can we translate it? How can we transpose her lengthy appellation into earth speech?

Look to Luke is easy, and Sighman to Simon, and even Alleysun into Alison goes; but Euteronomy seems too long and complicated a name for the woman who is collecting up the teacups. She's an ordinary person, but she's the one who's going to receive the sign.

She's the one, because she is looking for it, even though she doesn't know it is there. She's just a tea-lady, but she notices what the nurses don't, and she sees the shaft of golden sunlight that is pointing like a finger at Angela's empty cup. She looks for signs everywhere, even in the tea-leaves.

So she's the one who finds the message, the mini translation in a tea-cup. And she's the one who will pass it on to the people of your planet, one by one, word to mouth. As she takes the empty cup from the table, she glances at the tea-leaves out of love and faith in the meaning of things.

And as she sees what's written, wet and black on white china, stares deep into the dregs, we will give her human name if you lean close and let the last page of the translation whisper in your ear.

Promise not to tell anyone.

It's you.

