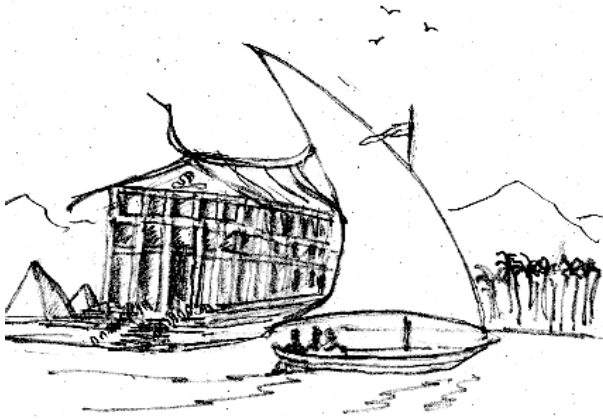


JANELA DO CEU

(Window of Heaven)



Ben sat down wearily on a rock and peered ahead through the grey light of dawn. He was cold wet and hungry. For three days he had been sleeping rough picking his way across the barren moors. He felt like a fugitive although whether he was or not he didn't know for not long before he had been blown up by a landmine and when he came to, although most of his physical parts had been put back together, Ben's memory wasn't among them. The nurses had consoled him with reassurances that given time it would come back, but so far it hadn't; and since he didn't know what had been stored in it, Ben couldn't decide whether he was better off with or without it.

Now as he stumbled forward through the rank dragging undergrowth, Ben was not even certain why he was making this journey. In his wearier moments he laid claim to the notion that he was being drawn here, but this failed to convince him for what little he knew of where he was heading was rumor, and impressed in that was the acknowledged fact that few people ever succeeded in gaining access. Either they were turned back or they turned back themselves.

What he did know was that during the years of the Long War many smaller states seized the chance to break away from the domination of the great powers and declared their independence. A few even chose to defy the global organizations that dominated the policies and economies of what was patronizingly called the third world, and go it alone, dismissing such glib rhetoric as the 'global village' for a thin disguise by the rich nations to subdue the poorer ones. Some of these countries because of their strategic recourses or geographical location were instantly declared 'rogue states' and subjected to embargo, sanctions, or even invasion until they did as they were told. But others were fortunate to be considered as of no importance and left alone. Ben's intended destination was just such a place.

Ben's impaired mind meant he knew little of world events. He didn't even know his real name. When the victims of the landmine had been blown up so had their identities and no one wanted to risk their lives searching for clues. Ben had been tagged 'B', and later one of the nurses had turned this to Ben after her brother, but when Ben watched his face in the mirror he wondered who he really was. Now without memory it was left to instinct to guide him, and instinct drew him to where he now stood. Perhaps it was a need for refuge that tugged him. He didn't attempt to think it through. Thought itself gave him blinding headaches. But very likely to be able to be nobody going nowhere, without constant questioning was one reason. At the hospital Ben was aware they had taken his photograph, his fingerprints and blood sample to see if they matched wanted terrorist's murderers or rapists. He hadn't chanced the result but escaped in clothes taken from a locker. Ben had found himself in a city He didn't understand the language, but he didn't understand much of any language these days and could only manage to stutter a few barely comprehensible words that the speech therapist had trained him to say, including "How now brown cow", and, "I am a Hal 2001 computer".-She was a lady with a sense of humor The night before he absconded- it was as if she knew, for she kissed him on the cheek and pinned a note to his shirt that read, "Dear Ben, a prince of hearts, is a man of many parts, but after stepping on a mine. His mind is sadly hard to find."





Any communication for Ben was largely silent. Anyway he never even considered trying to hide in the city. He knew immediately he hated cities, crowds, traffic, noise, He headed for open spaces. Others in his predicament might seek solace but Ben shunned companionship. He longed for forests, streams, waterfalls He wanted to find just such a place and stay there alone for ever-whatever that might mean, Ben never knew he was anywhere near the frontier where he now found himself. He simply felt an impelling urge drawing him on.

As the daylight grew Ben became aware of bells tinkling then as the grey mist dissolved he saw a long line of water buffaloes slowly making their way across some low lying fields while beyond them the sinuous curve of trees suggested a river. At this moment the sun appeared. A pale red globe poised above a blur of forested mountains the prospect brought a glad smile to warm Ben's weariness. He got up unsteadily balancing on his good leg and dragging the wounded one, he started to move forward. Ben was anxious to avoid meeting anyone. A few stilt huts under some giant bamboo clumps to his left propelled him right where patchy woodland gave him the cover he needed, a dog started howling. This unnerved Ben who dropped onto his hands and knees and climbed a grassy embankment to discover spread out before him a placid lake, with misty hills and wooded headlands plunging into the still unruffled surface. A leaky dugout was tethered to a half sunken jetty but Ben resisted the temptation to take it. Instead he lowered himself gently into the water and buoyed up, allowed himself to float out into a clump of water hyacinth and well buried among its leaves and lilies propelled himself slowly across the placid water towards the further shore. As he swam the mist lifted to reveal far down the lake a low hill crowned by a small pagoda that glowed golden in the streaming morning sunlight, and then he entered a small reedy bay and it vanished from his view.

Ben stumbled in the muddy shallows and slipping suddenly found himself jammed headfirst in a bamboo fish trap. As he pulled himself out something flapped and almost without knowing it Ben found himself clutching a large grey fish which as it struggled to get free fell instead on the bank where Ben dived and smothered it with his wet shirt. He tore off a length of thin creeper and passing this through the gills tied the fish securely to his belt and struggled up into the undergrowth. Ben didn't have to think about any of this. It happened automatically. It was only when he tried to think that difficulties and indecisions started. If he left himself on remote control then his mind and body seemed to function a lot better. Ben made his way through a plantation of young dark-leaved mango trees. The hanging pendels of fruit were regrettably too unripe to eat. On the far side he came on a tiny bamboo shelter, thatched with grass where a few implements were stored. There was a blackened cooking pot, a lamp fashioned out of a small tin and tucked in the thatch a bundle containing matches and tobacco. Ben wrapped some of the matches in leaves and left the but undisturbed. But his hearing had detected a sound that attracted him, and drew him forward across a pattern of dried and withered rice terraces to a clump of tall trees where he found a small stream cascading over low rocks. Without hesitation Ben started following the stream uphill into the jungle panoply of mountains that seemed to reach down to welcome him, Dragging himself carefully over the rocks and ducking to avoid creepers and low hung bamboo Ben climbed slowly upstream until he found a big flat rock where a narrow waterfall plunged into a shallow pool . There was plenty of driftwood lying around piled there by earlier rains. Trees and climbers overhung the stream and among them Ben noticed a wild banana and tearing off a frond laid it beside the fish which

he gutted with a pocket knife before wrapping it in the leaf. It was a matter of minutes to get a fire going for the wood was powdery dry, and once the flames had died down Ben laid the wrapped up fish in the embers. While it was cooking he hung up his clothes to dry and lay back on the rock staring contentedly up through the myriad leaves to the blue sky floating far above. On either side giant fluted trees soared upwards, tier upon tier of spreading branches, and the more Ben looked up entranced the more it seemed to him that these ancient trees were providing him a kind of sanctuary. Ben roused himself from his reveries, pulled the fish from the dead fire, prised open the charred wrapping and laid the steaming fish on a clean leaf before pulling off the soft flesh with his fingers. Afterwards Ben washed his hands in the stream and laid back again on his rock.

Late in the afternoon Ben continued climbing. Each waterfall led him to another pool, another waterfall, some cascading thirty feet or more, others tumbling haphazardly across sloping rocks. As the sun settled out of sight across the valley a new light swung up into the sky like a giant hanging lantern the full moon glowed with an impelling vigor in the vast night sky. Satisfied he had climbed high enough and far enough to be out of range of anybody, Ben spread his limbs wearily across a smooth rock and casting a final reassuring glance up to his guardian trees he gratefully surrendered to the embrace of sleep.

Ben was quite unaware that he was being watched, studied, his thoughts, his memory hidden even to him, revealed, considered, discussed. The watchers crouched around him in total silence. Like masked surgeons around an unconscious patient they glanced at each other with expressions of surprise, concern, pity but never a murmur escaped their lips. After studying his more obvious wounds they probed deeper and far within they finally discovered a tiny splinter of a distant scream hidden so deep that Ben had never been consciously aware of it, but which like a grain of sand lodged unseen somewhere within the workings of a grand orchestra could by its discord stop a symphony in its tracks. The watchers looked at one another in agreement. They did not need to speak even though they could. In fact after a mere moment of analysis they could speak fluently any language they met. But for them speech was a very limiting and frequently confusing form of communication. For in the isolation of their new found independence it was not only money and commerce and cities that had been abandoned but language itself. And these were no ordinary people. If at first glance they appeared little larger than children, their height and unaging features hid an agility and ability that few other people could match.

That in previous times there were many more species of man roaming the earth than now is in no doubt. Scientists who unearth evidence describe them with rather bizarre titles which in turn make us see them as savages when compared to our own sophistication. And the myths and legends with which we portray the distant past scaring and delighting children with tales of dwarfs and elves and goblins are perhaps reflections of ancient fears, when small isolated bands of people struggled to survive in a precarious and apparently hostile world. There is also no doubt that communities still change and adapt to circumstances. Those races living in frozen wastes are shorter and fatter to conserve body heat, those in arid regions of searing heat may be slimmer and taller to lose it. Mountain people are different to those of the plains and if there was an aquatic man he would very quickly acquire features at variance to his land cousin.



The watchers who silently regarded Ben as he slept had faces that stare out at us from ancient frescoes, faces that always somehow appear youthful: large oval eyes, smooth olive skins, hair cropped short dark or fair. One thing they all shared was their singularity, their likeness in feature, size, height, even their expressions but before Ben stirred in the cold graying light of dawn his silent watchers had vanished as swiftly as spirits into the depths of the ancient forest. Nonetheless they took with a very complete survey of Ben: body, mind, memory,, and there was no chance of this information being forgotten or muddled for they had already passed their thoughts on to those who for lack of a better word one may describe as communicators,

When Ben awoke stiff and cold, and huddled around a quickly made fire for warmth he was quite unaware of any of this. Certainly he had no idea that he had passed a frontier where the usual standards and habits no longer applied. He had entered a forbidden land, a land described in the recent history books as existing in a time warp A country of forests and mountains which because it posed no threat to anyone else had become entirely ignored by powers engaged in global economics , alliances and strategies.

Ben spent his morning continuing to climb up the stream from one pool to the next Once he glimpsed great hairy apes swinging from the trees ahead and then came on what he assumed was their interrupted breakfast; some spiky durians they had torn off and hurled down, and partly split open, Ben was not over-partial to durians, their smell put him off, but he was hungry and the greasy soft fruits assuaged his hunger. The tribes who had once ruled this ancient land and now once again controlled its destiny were naturally wary of any intruders. At the start of their self declared independence various incursions had occurred: logging companies, gem pirates, gold diggers, southern warlords eager for an easy conquest, displaced refugees. All had been rebuffed. Rarely by force however. Most on their return were rather unclear. They complained vaguely of getting lost, being led round in circles, of a sense of indecision that numbed their intentions, creating an unease and uncertainty that rebuked and defied every plan they tried to make. Some put the blame on supernatural forces, of streams that suddenly exploded into raging torrents, of hillsides that collapsed on top of them, of earth tremors, avalanches, even crevasses that split the earth before them and swallowed up men and machines. After a few years all attempts ceased. The land was left to itself and to the people who considered themselves its guardians. The forests grew with astonishing vigor burying the cities under a riot of impenetrable jungle, bridges snapped off, or were swept away by swollen rivers, landslides which had been the curse of generations of road builders, finally buried the evidence completely. It was as if the very earth rose up in revolt and shook itself clean and washed itself afresh under a sun and a moon that seemed to shine younger and purer than anywhere else on earth.

There were many outsiders who claimed this was a land of wizards and monsters, of fire-breathing dragons and giant serpents, of deadly spiders who wove poison webs yards wide to entrap the unwary and some even claimed to have seen people fly. The more fantastic the tales the more spellbound the audience so that the tales grew in the telling and re-telling as the imaginations grew to receive them. As is usually the case the truth was much more harmless but the rumors and mysteries had one great effect, they kept people out. The original inhabitants of this isolated realm claimed no more ownership of the land than we would of the oceans or the sky, nor did they consider themselves superior to

The plants and animals. In their age old lore everyone and everything dwelled in a spirit of co-dominion. As a consequence the people did not hunt but considered it natural to gather whatever the earth provided. Deep within this territory existed an inner core of settlements occupied by those who followed the natural law more rigorously, while scattered around outside were other settlements mostly of younger people who were allowed to adopt a more easygoing attitude.

These were a non-violent but not a passive people, for they would defend themselves robustly if need be, but unlike most races any spirit of aggression or desire to dominate was entirely absent from their character to be able to dwell in peace and harmony among themselves and with the natural world around them was their only ambition.

The sure footed hill ponies might be ridden but only with their consent, and without saddle or bridle. Material needs were of the most basic. Communities lived in simple stilt houses built with bamboo frames, thatch palm roofs, walls of split cane, woven grass mats to sit and sleep on. The cooking pots and water jars were earthenware. But this is not to deny the people were fond of food and drink Fermenting palm sap was collected from the trees in bamboo tubes. Wild honey, mushrooms and the constant variety of seasonal fruitst were considered delicacies. They also brewed coffee from wild beans and tea from highland leaf, and there were other herbs used in healing and for what was regarded as aids to self enlightenment.

Not by nature cultivators they gathered upland rice. Plantains, sugar cane. Wild yams, bananas. There were no domestic animals apart from hens and no caged birds although songbirds abounded near the villages attracted by food put out. It had long been established that any moral law they decided on must apply to one and all, and if the human spirit desired freedom, so surely did the spiritsnot only of animals and plants, but streams, mountains, forests This very notion of equality of spirit gave them a serenity rarely seen in folk who every day must compete whether in work or play. Needless to say they were a very social people wandering freely in and out of each other's houses, even the children were free to adopt other parents if they felt they preferred them, so that very often if was difficult to decide who belonged to whom. Not that this mattered very much in a society where sharing anything and everything was quite natural. Even though the sound of speech was entirely absent ,singing and laughter more than made up for it. The explanation was quite straightforward. These people had preserved over the centuries something that once long ago all peoples possessed- namely the ability to share each other's thoughts, so that no one could say one thing yet think another. Deception was therefore impossible among them and with it the wish to deceive. Nor had they any great sense of their self importance for' self was considered an illusion, and anyone with pretensions was ridiculed.

All this is a very general outline of the way of life in that isolated country Ben had unknowingly entered and about which he knew nothing. But one thing the watchers had noticed about Ben as he moved through the forest was an ability they possessed themselves- to be quite still. Motionless for long periods if need be. And one thing Ben noticed about himself was that he felt stronger, clearer headed, than he could ever remember. Just now Ben had been crouching quite motionless in the undergrowth for a long time. All his senses were alert to the slightest sound, scent, movement. He was aware that he was being watched even though he saw no one. But he didn't feel either threat or danger, rather a sense of anticipation. Whoever or whatever was watching him he would patiently wait for no matter how long it took.



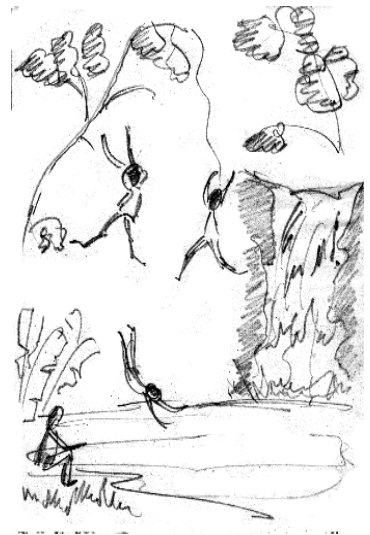


First he noticed an eye and then between the leaves more eyes. The watchers quietly pushed the branches aside and revealed themselves. Ben said nothing and they smiled. They were not very tall, about five foot but well built and with graceful I features, shining teeth and smooth skins. They did not seem very old or very young. There was no apparent leader. Four of them stood around him, as if inviting him to join them, three boys and a girl. They were barefoot with sarongs tucked up round their waists, a cloth bag loosely hung from the shoulder and a long knife tucked in a split cane sheath. They were all bare chestd. Ben thought the girl was about fifteen, but she could have been some years older. They wore colored headbands and had tucked flower blossoms in them as a simple adornment. Without saying a word they set off leading Ben carefully between the trees. As they walked they were constantly glancing in all directions and seemed to be conferring with one another although never was a spoken word exchanged. Suddenly they entered a grassy glade where to Ben's surprise there were five ponies grazing. One for each of them. It was as if they had been expecting him.

Although Ben couldn't remember when he had last been on horseback he needn't have worried. The pony knew its job and all Ben had to do was sit bareback and try to keep his long legs from dragging in the undergrowth. Nevertheless he felt wearier than he expected when in the late afternoon they finally halted. As he dismounted his knees buckled and Ben hobbled around clutching for support. This unpredicted pantomime caused considerable mirth in which he joined in mocking his own weakness. Once the ponies had been set free to graze Ben was led to a massive rain tree where high up among the branches he could just make-out a canopied platform. The problem was reaching it, but an impish face appeared over the edge and a rope ladder dropped to the ground.

Before climbing up Ben followed his companions towards the sound of falling water and was delighted to discover a large rock pool fed by a sparkling cascade into which everyone leaped. Opening his eyes Ben found the water crystal clear and he swam down to a bed of golden sand. When he surfaced it was to find his companions diving with such amazing daring and dexterity it was easy to imagine they were actually flying as they swooped and swung from branch to dangling creeper before finally plunging into the pool far below them.

When they climbed back up to the platform Ben found that hammocks had been slung and food set out. The plates were leaves and the mugs bamboo but the assortment of fruits, cooked vegetables, brown rice, mushrooms, boiled chestnuts mashed with honey, and wafers of warm bread more that satisfied his hunger and to add to his delight he discovered there was not only sparkling spring water to drink, but also a dark foaming yeasty ale that more than quenched his thirst. He lay back replete. His companions smiled at him as they conferred animatedly but silently among themselves. In addition to the four who had found him several others apparently lived here. Ben, tired as he was, was interested in many features of the tree house, how the leafy branches had been woven to make walls. The cooking was done on a large sand tray suspended by creepers, which could be cut in an instant should a fire start. Although the roof was open to the night sky there were screens of leaf thatch ready to slide across in case it rained. His clothes had been hung up to dry and Ben was given a sarong to wrap around himself and to keep warm in his hammock. He noticed how the others were gathered in a silent circle staring up at the bright stars overhead but even as he peered into the night sky sleep overcame him.





Next day after a quick meal they set off only now the forest had thinned and there was a clear track to follow. They descended into a deep valley, forded a stony stream, and then climbed over a low pass with towering craggy mountains on either side. The path skirted the next valley and passed through scrubby woods towards the sound of a waterfall. As they drew near they could see the cascade plunging over a cliff face. They rested the ponies and bathed in the cold spray and then continued along a narrow ledge with a sheer drop to the valley floor far far below. Beyond the cliff the path zigzagged up through dense woods before emerging into an open meadow. Above them on a spur of bare land Ben could see the ruins of white walled houses and collapsed tile roofs the closer they got to the ruined village the larger it grew. They reached a spring that had been channeled into a cistern with a date carved on the cement, then unexpectedly a stretch of dirt road half buried by fallen rocks. Under the trees on either side Ben could dimly make out the remains of buildings with tree roots snaking over their walls. Some even bore names in faded lettering, - The Court House, Hatton's Bank, The Club, Cargills Store, Post Office, and to his great astonishment 'Railway Station'; The roof had fallen in and the track was only recognizable by the narrow cutting in the hillside it emerged from, but rusted and untouched for many a decade stood an old squat steam engine, with a plate riveted to its boiler that read 'Glasgow 1913'. Ben noticed his companions watching him for his reaction but he merely shrugged and followed them. Such things didn't mean much to him anymore.

Some of the buildings that had lower floors still intact were occupied by white cattle and at a turn in the lane they came on the ruins of a church where a large black bull snorted at them fiercely. His companions laughed and dismounting in an adjacent field led Ben to a two storey tiled house on the edge of the spur with a commanding view over the valley. A faded sign announced, 'Mercers School' and there waiting to greet them on the outside stairway stood an elderly bearded man who Ben somehow assumed was the retired headmaster. He was wrapped in an assortment of patched and worn out garments. His companions nudged Ben forwards while the old man held out his hand. "Welcome", he said genially, and to his own surprise Ben not only understood but muttered an audible "Thank you," in reply. The companions clapped their hands in obvious delight, and ushered the two back into the building while they went off on their own.

"Come in, or rather come on up, I should say," Beamed the custodian, guiding Ben up the stairs into a rather bare room." Be careful how you tread. Some of the beams are rather rotten. Here, sit down." He pointed to a bench. "This used to be the schoolroom long ago." He nodded towards a cupboard. "Still have some of the old exercise books but please don't think I had anything to do with it. I'm just the lodger. I don't know what your feelings are about schooldays; I never particularly cared for mine. Lived in fear of a daily beating. But never mind that. Through that door beyond was the hall where those young patriotic voices all sang 'Jerusalem'. I'm glad to say it's long since collapsed. But come here. Look at the view. Isn't it splendid.?" Ben nodded. It certainly was. Beyond the valley rose range upon range of magnificent peaks, the far off ones capped with snow. "Now would you like a cup of tea?" inquired the old man. "By the way I'm Mago. I used to be a water color painter in the other life," He admitted vaguely. "But they pull my beard and tease me that. I'm a wizard- hence Mago. And you are...." He paused but Ben said nothing. He sensed the old magician knew about him already and that their meeting was no coincidence. "They gave me a name," he managed. "They?" The Mago raised his eyebrows. "The hospital. After..." But he didn't try to finish. "Sorry, if I'm being a bit chatty." The

Mago apologized. "That's what one misses being here. Chatting. Wonderful people of course but it's hard for us who have been brought up to speak, to give it up entirely. And" he added in a confidential whisper, "When you know they could speak any language they want if need be." Ben didn't know what to say but fortunately at this moment the tea arrived, borne aloft by a small boy with a huge grin. "Master!" he exclaimed as he laid the tray before them with an extravagant flourish. And then mimicking the Mago's refined voice to perfection, added "and is there honey still for tea?" before breaking into a peal of laughter and vanishing down the stairs.

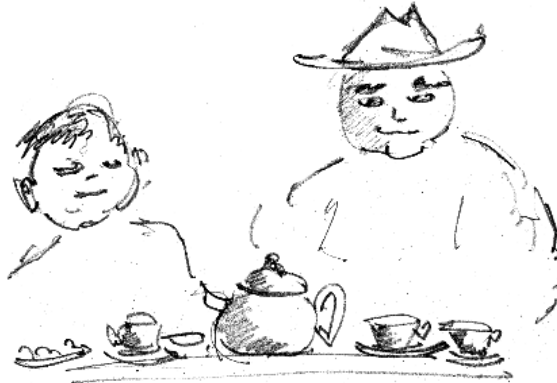
The china cups and saucers were chipped and stained from long use, the teapot had lost half its spout and the red tin full of small rice cakes had a faded picture of a kilted highlander and the words "Edinburgh shortbread" on the lid. "Ah, jasmine scented today," exclaimed the Mago sniffing the fumes as he poured, "And the honey reminds me the honey from the Rif Mountains. I used to live there you know. Had a house in Tanger, Number Nought, 0, Place du Kasbah, but my heart was always in the Rif. My houseboy came from there. Reminds me of this imp. Still I'm very lucky to be here at all." He peered at Ben. "Seen quite a few pass through here over the years, travel apprentices I call them. Old men, young men, black hair, white. Names to conjure with, fallen statesmen, disgraced financiers, writers, generals, philosophers." He chuckled, "Theirs one ex-opera singer. La diva, I called her. She can barely stagger Goodness knows how she made the journey. Soared here singing her last aria, I daresay. But she has guts. The 'show-must-go-on' sort of attitude. What becomes of people like that?" He peered wistfully at Ben. "And what'll become of you?" Ben said nothing and the Mago rescued him from this dilemma saying breezily, "I daresay you're wondering why I'm here? Answered this advert in the Times. 'Old buffer seeks similar ga-ga, trout fishing august. Scottish highlands.'" Ended up here. Must have taken a wrong turning in Edinburgh." He chuckled. "How about you?" Ben merely nodded. "I can't remember much."

"Of course it's a good thing in a way you've lost your memory." The Mago paused thoughtfully. "You might even be allowed into the inner core, the heartland so to speak. I'm not. I don't think any outsider ever has. You look surprised. They guard the Holy Mysteries, you see. Pray for the good of the outside world. Perhaps pray is not the word, think about it. Trying to get disasters averted. Yes, well I know they haven't had a lot of success recently, a catalogue of wars, famines, global epidemics,,,, but perhaps if they hadn't been 'praying' things might have been a lot worse. Of course I realize all this means as little to you as to a child of three but what counts is that this small remote and off-limits territory is a source for peace. Trouble is there are all those who would give anything to get control of it. "He noticed Ben's troubled expression." "Tourism for a start. It's a global business always seeking new frontiers." He waved a hand towards the blackboard, "Visualized the brochures advertising a new 'Shangri La', and the scientists with their self inspired researches, The fundamentalists who dismiss these quaint religious practices as pagan , the N.G.O's" Ben seemed puzzled. "Non governmental organizations. They are a law unto themselves and no one dares defy them. Moral arbiters who live off fat salaries behind security fences and drive around in big jeeps telling everyone how to think and how to function. Bloody cheek I call it. But alas! He declared theatrically," the shadow is advancing, " Then he looked carefully at Ben "Yes, perhaps these people here are right. Memory is such a burden. That's the way they might look at it. Personally I wouldn't be without mine but I can see their point. It's hard to make a decision without memory butting in. Take a new born child it hasn't any. Its mind, like yours I suppose is a blank page to be written on. Perhaps that's what is meant by

Being born again. Still we'll see." He beamed a bright smile on Ben. "It is good to see you," he emphasized. "I've been expecting you, you know. We all have." He noticed Ben's puzzled look. "Oh, don't imagine I'm a 'seer with second sight. I'm not really a magician. No, we have to thank the 'communicators', as I call them. If one want to know anything one tunes in to them. "He shrugged regretfully." One doesn't always get an answer" he admitted. "They can be very closed."

"You've met them? These communicators?" asked Ben, speaking with more confidence.

"Met them!" explained the Mago. "Not me. Nor anyone I know .I don't expect your traveling friend's have either. No, they live in the inner core. In the blessed heartland. "He gestured with his arm towards the ruined town outside."Even in the old imperial days no one ever interfered. It was declared a 'no go' zone. The home of the Gods. A great sleeping volcano. Mount Papamanchua, There used to be an old biddy living in a treehouse at the foot. Eccentric wife of some deceased tea-planter. No one else allowed near the place. Tribal law. And probably any attempt would have been foiled anyway." He studied Ben carefully. "But I wonder if that's why you are here. Nobody really comes. We're all drawn. A thousand miles at the end of nowhere. Where one has time to think of things," he concluded rather lamely and then added abruptly, in a rather military manner, "Can't get rid of self. That's the problem. Get rid of self and you're free so they say but what or who would I be without my personality Even if I do despise it at times could I manage without it? Perhaps not having a memory helps but I have and there's nothing I can do about that. Have another rice cake. Not quite the same as buttered scones, but not bad either."



After what the Mago described as schoolroom tea , he led Ben outside for a stroll. "Yes," he reflected," This was where the imperial masters came in the hot season. A hill station they called it. "He chuckled," It's certainly on a hill and it does have a station. I doubt during their tennis parties and their games of bridge at the club they ever contemplated that one day it would be abandoned and left to the domain of cattle. My domain too I suppose, but that's another story. And I'm not the only reprobate," he continued after a pause Perhaps it's a sanctuary or a prison. Or a confessional. Perhaps that's the purpose to it. I've had tyrants pour out their excuses, crooked financiers who have driven thousands to penury claiming it was all the mistake of accountants and they never meant harm, I expect you'll meet some of them later," he confided. "Can't be avoided. New face, you see. Everyone wants to see the new boy in town. Find out why he's here. Gossip, only thing to do. Not that they'll get far with you. " Ben was rather taken aback. He hadn't understood that anyone else was here. But after a moment's reflection it didn't bother him. Although his companions had vanished he didn't somehow feel this was the end of his journey.

Supper had been prepared in the ' waiting room' of the old railway station. When he arrived with the Mago there were already assembled various people busy talking and gesturing. This suddenly ceased as all eyes turned Ben. Mago made the introductions. "This old rogue," he indicated a large bald-headed man who extended his hand in a rather patronizing manner. "Ex president Mubarto, the most benign dictator," he announced sarcastically, adding "Great tyrant more likely, responsible for more human rights abuses than you could list." Mubarto flashed a gold-toothed smile and tut-tutted, "that is all history and doesn't concern our friend; please meet Mr. Poros, the world renowned financier." He turned to a rather gaunt tight-lipped man. "Global terrorist, "muttered Mago."Just because you didn't wear a balaclava and carry a belt full of grenades you inflicted more terror, more poverty, more despair on

Millions by your currency manipulations....." "Come now," Poros purred with a sleek smile, "You exaggerate. And all that means nothing to our friend, "He looked at Ben as if he was assessing him."And who are you? You must be someone else you wouldn't be here. ""Yes," intervened Mubarto."Very convenient not to remember. I wish I could be so lucky." "Lucky!" exclaimed a theatrical voice, and Ben turned to a tall elegant woman with faded gold hair. "Allow me to introduce La." said Mago. "My dear," she declared. "I am so lucky to remember everything. Aruias when my spirits soared until I felt suspended in a heavenly plane, lovers, ah, lovers who.....:" "Yes," interrupted Mago, "Perhaps it's time to eat"

While they had been talking the Mago's cheerful helper together with some assistants had been setting food out on a large old table. Candles had been lit and they sat down to eat in a friendly and conciliatory mood. Ben found himself next to a man who introduced himself, "I'm Frank-Used to be manager of a 'bras' factory in the 'Bronx. I can tell the cup size of any woman at fifty paces." On his other side sat a lady with hair down to her hips who introduced herself in a languid voice "I am Galadrlal, queen of the elves." Ben nodded. "Number 41 Wilson Avenue," she continued. "It's only a council estate but beggars can't be choosers can they, dear. I used to be hitched up with the local wizard but he decided to become a train driver so I ended up here. "She paused as if to give time for Ben to comment but he said nothing. She added conspiratorially. "I see you've been talking to the Great Procurer," "Who?" asked Ben. She indicated the Mago. "Should have had a plaque over his house in Tangier, 'by appointment procurer to royalty, archbishops, judges, politicians,,,,'" The Mago glared her across the table, "Just gossiping you wicked old man. Where was I? Oh, yes, ending up here. Actually," she added in a suppressed whisper "I was climbing up Glastonbury tor."She resumed her penetrating drawl." Half way house I call it. Not that any of us get any further, except you maybe. "She turned in her chair to study him."Not a great conversationalist are you, dear. Still I suppose having no memory doesn't help." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Perhaps I could help you there. I can read palms, minds, cards, feet, head bumps; I may be just able to connect..."She didn't complete the sentence. A loud "Humph!" from the Mago stopped her. She shrugged, "Perhaps it's just as well." As Ben looked down the table a dozen foreigners were gesturing and arguing at the same time. He heard a voice shout "You don't have to go to Africa to discover the Heart of Darkness. The heart of darkness is Tonbridge on a Saturday night after the pubs close. If you sit on a bench you'll be accosted by a queer, arrested by the police, or mugged by a junkie. I tell you....." But loud cheers drowned his words. Ben wished only that he was back by the waterfall staring up into the night sky, into the heart of stillness.

Later as the Mago led Ben back to a room where his hammock had been prepared. He bowed his head sadly. "Tomorrow you will leave but it is hidden from me where they are taking you. Only good luck, my dear boy."

Soon after daybreak Ben was once again guided down into the valley. All day they followed a swiftly flowing stream while high wooded crags closed in ever steeper on either side. High overhead a pair of eagles soared on the rising air, while above the rushing music of the stream sounded the chattering of a million crickets and the mocking cry of parakeets. At noon they halted to eat sticky rice that had been cooked in bamboo tubes, and they bathed in the stream. Ben noticed how casually they shed their clothes and how graceful they looked poised on rocks or half hidden under a cascade. He was not embarrassed to swim naked in the stream. He felt relaxed. The meeting with the foreigners had made him uneasy, had cast doubts in





his mind. This silence was much more to his liking. Although he couldn't share his companions' thoughts he felt very close to them, and he started to view himself from the outside as if with their eyes. When they looked at him it was no longer an interrogation but an intimacy. Like touch, their thoughts reached out to him and he wanted to embrace them in return.

By evening they had reached the head of the valley and crossed a high grassy plateau where they camped. Ahead a high conical peak stood out sharply against the sky and as night deepened and stars blazed high above, other lights appeared, like lanterns showing a route up this commanding height. Ben anticipated what lay ahead, but first after their shared meal he was allowed to rest. Hours later they woke him from a dreamless sleep. There was no need for anything to be spoken. Ben already knew. He smiled at his hosts and they touched him gently in turn. Then he set off. Overhead a mass of bright stars sparkled in a velvet night sky. There was no moon to light the path but at first it climbed in easy stages with a lantern at each twist and stair. At one resting pace he found an earthenware mug of hot sweet tea even though he saw no one. As he progressed the path grew steeper. Steps were cut into the rock and in some more difficult places a rope had been placed to guide and to grip. The night began to pale to the first grey light of dawn. Directly above him the black summit reared stark and dramatic. The lanterns ceased. Ben stumbled for safe footholds. Far off a cock crowed. Finally with a desperate effort he heaved himself onto the rock platform at the top and kneeling dizzily to get his breath back he saw a tall figure silhouetted before him. It held a long horn that reached to the ground. Suddenly three low resounding blasts sounded and to the east the first crescent of the new sun shone over the jagged tips of distant mountains. Three more horn blasts sounded and the sun rose gracefully in a giant red orb. Ben noticed the figure's outstretched arm and looked where it was pointing. To his astonishment he could see a dark triangular reflection of the mountain imprinted on the western sky. Surely, he thought, this is not possible but it was there. Then as he gazed it slowly dissolved and as he turned back the figure too had vanished. Ben ran to the spot where it had stood. There was no sign of anyone.

Daylight had yet to flood the plain below. This still lay hidden in darkness. Just below the summit Ben found a stone slab to rest on together with a mug of scalding tea and some rice cakes daintily placed on a fresh leaf. Without thinking Ben put one of the rice cakes on a rock as a gesture of thanks, although to whom and for what he was unsure.

After this simple breakfast Ben felt very refreshed and started down with a confidence that surprised him. 'Where are you going?' he asked himself. 'Nowhere,' he replied. 'And what are you seeking?' 'Nothing,' he answered and smiled with a sense that this was how it should be.

The rising sun shone on what at first appeared to be rocky pinnacles, but suddenly Ben realized they were stone temples, massive rather than ornate. Huge domes of ancient masonry capping steep man-made mounds rising like great domes floating on the dense green sea of forest swirling below.

As he sat there Ben saw two figures approaching along a narrow path. One appeared to be a teenage boy with tangled brown hair and rather ragged clothes, torn trousers and a jacket with the pocket half off. The other was a tall black-skinned hunter. His hair was pasted with clay and his ear lobes had been cut out and now hung dangling above his shoulders. He wore a long red robe, draped like a roman



toga and over this sported a dinner jacket, the parting present of some white hunter, in which he stuck an assortment of spears, hunting clubs, arrows, bow and knives.

The boy who had unusual green eyes introduced the hunter. "S'appelle Mobashu." The hunter acknowledged this with a dignified nod and greeted Ben with "Jambo m'zungi (hallo white man). The boy announced, "Je suis Rashid, le petit guide. J'ai quinze ans - regarde les chevaux," he added ambiguously. "Peut-etre je vous aidez. Si vous voulez faire les voyages dehors ou si vous preferrez les voyages dedans. (the journeys without or within,,) Ben made no comment. Rashid nodded as if everything was. Settled. "Viens. Maintenant . Cast loin." Leaving Ben with little choice but to get up and follow.

Further along the path they caught up with a long haired young man sitting beside a large steel suitcase contemplating his boots. Rashid introduced him as Fritz, adding "Voici un communist. Regarde. N'est ce pas?" Fritz peered up through his tangled hair. "Ja, das is, das is. a marxist-leninist. I was, but nowadays that too bourgeois is." What new persuasion he had converted to he didn't say.

"Fritz est toujours preoccupe avec la revolution." commented Rashid striding on after Mobashu. "Ja,ja das is zo," agreed Fritz nodding solemnly as he rose to join them. "It is in my soul. I make a one hundred and ten percent commitment. You think that is why I am here?" He must have noticed Ben's startled expression for he hastily corrected himself. "No, no," he laughed, patting Ben's shoulder. "To losing my memory. Like you. That is my wish. My friend you are fortunate. For with memory I cannot discover nothing and unless I find nothing I cannot find everything." He tugged at the steel suitcase on wheels. "This is 'fido'; he introduced. "He follows me everywhere, especially downhill, ha ha! Fido is my memory. He is full of the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao ze Dung."

Ahead of them Mobashu looped his earlobes into a knot, tucked up his toga and swinging a hunting club in one hand started racing down the path. What he was chasing was unclear but Rashid regarded him with satisfaction. "Mobashu est un tres grande chasseur!" he declared with admiration. Mobashu suddenly dropped flat on the ground and peered ahead. He grunted, raced forward and crouching on his heels peered intently at the ground. Then cutting off a long thin shoot he threaded it into a small hole. When he withdrew it, he sniffed the end and a grin crossed his lined face. "Miele" announced Rashid knowledgably. "Gut, gut," chuckled Fritz. Mobashu discarded his weapons and chopped down a stout club, sharpened the end and started to dig. He continued to dig until he reached the honeycomb. Fortunately the disturbed ground bees had no sting. Mobashu extracted the dripping honeycomb and shared it out. They all ate greedily, grubs and all and sat there licking their fingers. Mobashu chuckled, collected his armory of weapons, untied his ear lobes and strolled ahead with great dignity.



It was a blessing they had Mobashu to lead them for the path was scarcely visible to any but the experienced hunter's eyes. Mobashu kept up a fast pace stopping only to gather food: wild carrots, edible mushrooms, and a large jackfruit. They didn't stop to eat. All day they continued across the wooded plain. When Fritz complained of hunger, Rashid admonished him. "Le vrai chasseur n'arrete pas." Fritz merely shrugged, acknowledging his weakness to Ben. "It was hunger made me join the communist party," he confessed. "I was a student in Venice. Have you been there? Then imagine a city where the streets are full of water. I was a very poor and the trattoria da Pio gave party members a thirty percent discount. And, there was a dance every



saturday in Piazza Marguerita. So I joined for economic reasons, but I learned my idealism late in Paris where we fought the fascist gendarmes, cobble stones against batons and tear gas. And later I volunteered in Nicaragua working in the fields as a campesino so the farmers would be freed to fight for 'la revolucion!' He laughed He nudged Ben," Now, you know where we are going? It is a joke. We are heading for the waters of forgetfulness. Like the days of ancient Greece. You drink the waters of Lethe flowing out of the Pindus Mountains and then, freed of the burden of the past, you climb the via Sacra to approach the Delphic oracle. Ha-ha, he." Then he shrugged again. "What does it matter? We are only shadows and dust. Shadows and dust. "He reached out his hands as if to bathe them in the passing leafy shadows." And self is the biggest illusion of all."

Ben listened politely. It meant nothing more to him than the sound of their footsteps, or a cracking twig. In the late afternoon Mobashu finally stopped. "Nous arretons ici;" Rashid announced. While they rested Mobashu busied himself gathering thorn branches with which he built a circular palisade. "Il a peur des lions," explained Rashid. Satisfied with his defensive wall, Mobashu set to work making a fire. Squatting down he placed a thin piece of wood over his hunting knife and gripping this with his heels he pulled a fire stick from his robe, poked the point onto the wood and started spinning vigorously between his palms. In a few moments a whisp of smoke arose and nursing a handful of dry blossom over it he crouched down and blew a controlled hiss of breath... The blossom burst. Into flame. Rasid cheered excitedly, "Le feu, le feu."

It was astonishing what Mobashu stored about him apart from weapons. Rice, onions, eggs from a guinea fowl nest, a cooking pot. After they had eaten Mobashu carefully folded his dinner jacket and propped his head on a neck rest so as not to disturb his coiffure. Rashid lay beside Ben staring up at the magnificent display of night stars. "Quest ce que tu reve? Qu'est ce qua tu fais devenir?" And softly he answered himself, "Moi j'aime les poissons rouge, tous les poissons rouge dansent clans la mer." Ben was just content, thrilled even, to watch the stars.

"Why is he armed?" said Fritz watching Mobashu who stood guard while they were washing in a stream next morning. "I tell you he is the self appointed guardian of the free world against the barbarians. Here you see an old black hunter with only a hunting club and a spear standing against all the modern weapons of war and harassment and terror that the superpowers impose. Yes, my friend it is they who are the greedy global terrorists, but more subtle that the suicide bombers of old, for they wear the mantle of their self appointed laws to give their moral corruption a facade. Their fundamentalist laws are not based on reason or consensus but as a response to hysteria whipped-up by their tabloid newspapers, "Ben made no response. Fritz went on. "My friend I realize this means nothing to you. But believe me, when I say I was a party member, I was a social communist, as in community, companion - one you share bread with, like us. You understand." He stared away at the horizon of Blue Mountains. "Beyond those borders the barbarians are gathering. This last defiant outpost of freedom offends them. The generals, the multinationals, the computer barons, telecom giants, soft- drink kings, all eager for conquest. And the great religions are waiting like wolves to claim new converts. They are so consumed by their own convictions that they cannot conceive a society that does not need their rituals and their blessings, and the money merchants- they are appalled! Here is a land where there is no money, but you should see the thriving village markets. To a financier a society that does no need money or commerce is a heresy that must be destroyed. To a telephone company a nation that does not need

to speak but comprehends by thought is a anathema; to the mighty armament developers a country that has no army and lives in peace is an insidious imposter. Yes, I know the old communism was high-jacked by dictators but this pretence at democracy is just as much a front to keep the rich and powerful in control. Democracy "he scoffed." So why should fifty one percent dictate to forty nine percent? And do the people really govern? It is such a con trick. This new bullying Capitalism with all its trade rules designed to keep the rich rich and the rest in subservience. So, do not laugh at this fine black hunter standing guard for all the poor villages of Africa, guard against those who would steal their forests and dictate what they should grow or hunt." He appeared to run out of words, laughed and plunged back into the stream leaving Ben to collect his own drying clothes while observing Mobashu with a new curiosity.

"Mess amts," Rashid informed them, a rather unlikely leader in his ragged clothes, tangled hair, and fractured French. "Aujourd'hui, mes amis nous decidons ou nous voyagons. Mobashu va al frontiere pour protege la liberte, egalite et la fraternite de la nation , et, " he turned to Fritz, to aussr, Fntz. Tu es un commissar politique. Dehors!" he gestured dramatically towards the outside world. "Les barbarians, les terrorist super states." "Das is what I have been telling you," Fritz declared to Ben, as he stood proudly to attention and received his orders. "Mot," Rashid announced, "Je suis Is petit guide. Je prend l'etranger Ben ici , au sacra coeur, au centre pour presenter et pour retrouver (inspiration . Allons mes amici. Et la mistere sacre protege noire anime."(and may the sacred mystery protect our souls).

Once the other two had departed on their mission Rashid announced that first they would go to the holy pool and cleanse themselves. Any mention of water seemed to appeal to Ben's inner nature and he consented readily enough. All day they walked through a picturesque but deserted landscape. A river wound its way in graceful loops across a lush valley and a backdrop of distant Blue Mountains framed the horizon. Just when they need food and rest they found a small tavern - no more than a few tables with bright chequered cloths set under olive trees, whose leaves turned from green to silver in the welcoming breeze. A large jolly peasant woman greeted them. "Menu du jour" commanded Rashid, and from a small hut half buried under a vine pergola the woman returned with a tray of crisp bread, olives, a small carafe of red wine, a savory bowl of soup, hot floury rice, salads, and fruits. "tres agreable," Rashid condescended as they departed and the woman who had served them without a word spoken blessed them both with a motherly smile.

In the later afternoon they found themselves on the crest of a hill covered with citrus trees, ripe oranges and lemons scented the still early evening air. From below they could hear splashes but before they reached the pool a wiry gipsy woman, her arms tattoed with henna hurried forward and gripped Rashid by the hand. "Messieurs, peut etre vous desirez embracer les fillettes. J'ai tous, tous," and waved her free hand towards where faintly through the dusk could be seen a group of girls in white. "Quinze ans, dix-huit ans, j'ai tous." But Rashid merely regarded her sternly and pulled himself free of her grasp. "Madame, nous allons bagner." "D'accord" agreed the gipsy, "Maintenant embracer, apres bagner." But her suggestion did not weaken Rashid's resolve. Grabbing Ben's arm he strode resolutely downhill. In a last desperate appeal the woman called after them, "Peut etre vous preferez les garcons. Ja' tous, tous."

Rashid whispered to Ben "La dame celui est la guardian delta piscine. Elle est un voleur des anime (e stealer of souls). " When they approached the pool through the



trees. It lay dark and deserted, reflecting a silvery crescent moon and faint early stars. Rashid stripped off and plunged in. Ben followed. At once the oddest sensation overcame him and when he surfaced it was not to the dark grassy bank he expected with Rashid beckoning. Instead he found himself standing in crystal clear water while some distance ahead lay a white sand shore, so dazzling under a shining blue sky that it hurt his eyes to look. Shielding his face from the glare Ben stepped through the shallows and dropped wearily onto the beach, scooping the surface and pressing his face into the wet cool sand beneath.

He woke up refreshed and started walking inland. Beyond a low line of grassy dunes lay cultivated fields. Scattered farmhouses were clearly visible among isolated pockets of trees, each bordered by neat fences. Ben felt no anxiety about being seen. Small children spilled into the dusty lane to wave as he passed, while from open doorways women held up babies pointing him out and smiling. He passed through a small village. Old men sitting in the shade nodded politely. As the evening closed in and swallows swooped and darted in the dusk some children in the simplest homespun clothes led him cheerfully to a house where he was shown where to wash, then brought into a large room and fed. Most of the village seems to have gathered to watch, but there were none of the usual questions. Ben simply assumed that as with the silent watchers who had met him by the waterfall, they already knew. And it was quite probable they knew a lot more about him than he did. Finally when everyone left Ben was shown to a hammock pitched outside. As he lay staring up at the stars he had the oddest sensation that he was watching an entirely different sky.

Next day he continued his journey and towards evening he approached a town. There were no ponies or carts but there were plenty of people walking in the shaded lanes. The low houses were built of mud bricks with thatch roofs. And each had a courtyard with tall shady trees, hanging plants and trellises of flowers. Ben had halted, confused and uncured where to go, when a familiar commanding voice called out to him, "Ici, ici." Rashid's familiar figure in the same torn clothes was waving to him. Ben grinned. He felt that if 'le petit guide' had a wristwatch he would be pointing to it and insisting that Ben was late. Rashid seemed very pleased to see him. "J'ai attend ici per toi tous les apres-midi;" he told him, clutching his hand and guiding him through a labyrinth of lanes to a small house set back in a large bowered courtyard where an elderly man came out to greet them. "Grandpere," Rashid introduced.

Ben needed to sit down. The old man smiled kindly and took him to a shaded bench while Rashid emerged from the house with a pitcher of cold water. No one confused Ben with questions and he was relieved not to have to explain even to himself events he did not understand. Inside the house the walls were quite bare. There was no clutter of ornamentation, but the sheer simplicity felt homely. Later Rashid led Ben to a nearby street market, where they ate at a small tavern. The air was spicy with the rich aroma of cooking. Lanterns hung in the trees and there was a friendly bustling atmosphere with a lot of laughter and a young man playing a mandolin, but although everyone appeared to be engaged in animated discussion never a word was spoken. When they left no money changed hands, but as Ben had never handled money since his accident he had forgotten what it was or what was the need for it.

Next morning it was the old man who led them on a tour of the city. There was no transport and none of the usual activities one sees in cities; streets being dug up, cables being laid or raised, signs everywhere. There were no signs, no hoardings and although there were plenty of neighborhood markets and a bustle of people



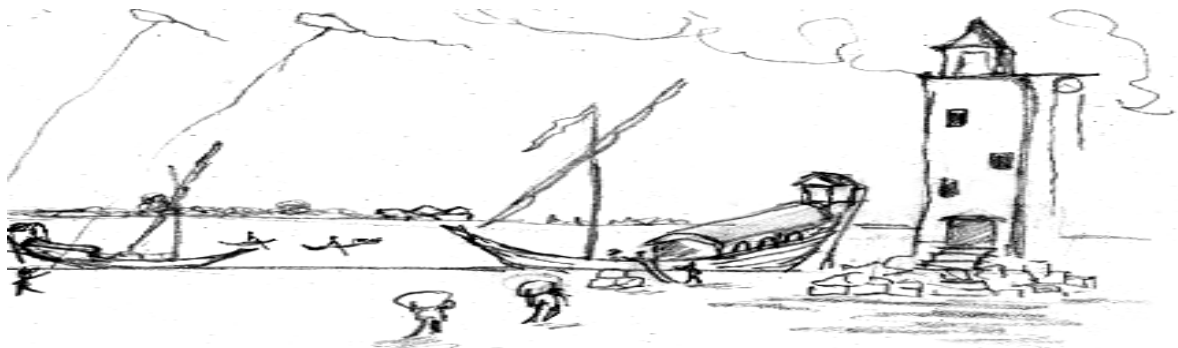
exchanging food and goods, there were no monuments churches, schools, hospitals, banks, police stations, and all the other buildings one associates with city life. In fact all the lanes were remarkably similar shaded by leafy and flowering trees and with small unattended stalls at frequent intervals where large earthenware jars of cool water and a clay mugs offered refreshment to the thirsty. And although the lanes were surfaced only with packed mud, crushed stones or cobbles they were level and well drained and aqueducts carrying water, and sewers to dispose of it were apparent. In fact water was an important feature of the city, at every main intersection

small parks were laid out with trees, benches, and fountains. Here while the old men gathered in silent discussion, the children playing, laughing at games of marbles, hopscotch, and flying paper kites.

Finally they reached a big open square with a tall isolated tower on one side and a broad river beyond. Boats were unloading cargoes and sampans plyed across the river to the far shore where small settlements were clearly visible against the backdrop of trees. The square was unshaded and apart from the tower there stood a series of squat unadorned buildings that Ben assumed were warehouses for when they went inside the large rooms were full of unfamiliar and expensive looking goods that all seemed quite out of keeping with the simplicity of the city. Despite Ben's memory loss he had been in hospital long enough to recognize the cars, televisions, mobile 'phones, computers, refrigerators, but in other galleries there were huge items which struck an ominous discord in his muddled mind; fighter jets, army tanks, guns, finned bombs, masks, mines, and beyond them a gallery of black and white photographs. The early ones showed happy children but the later ones were victims many hideously mutilated, each one bearing a number. The gallery of photographs was very extensive and had the effect of numbing Ben's emotions entirely, until suddenly the old man stepped forward and pointed out one particular photograph. There stood a happy child wrapped in a short overcoat and muffler standing on a frozen pond. Fair hair poked out from under a woolly beret. He was holding hands with a girl in school uniform and pigtails and a more serious looking older boy in a raincoat. Ben realized he was looking at himself and then suddenly realized what this place was. It was where the city could look at itself as it had one been. Rashid nodded, "C'est le Museu des beaux artes." Outside he noticed Ben staring at the tower across the square. "Ce n'est pas finis," he explained, "Celui la est le monument dedique a la monde ideale. Ce n'est past finis."

That night as they lay in their bunks in the grandfather's house Rashid reached down and whispered. "Dorme toi?" adding "Si to ferme les yeux, qu'es ce que to veu? Moi, si de ma volante je aurais voule avec les poissons rouge dansent dans le mer. Et toi?" Ben thought about that. Rashid shook him, "tu dorme?" "No," said Ben. "Qu'es'ce'que to reve?" "I am flying above forests to a secret waterfall," Ben admitted. "There is a pool somewhere where we can swim and be safe for ever. Je voudrais faire," he began again so Rashid would understand, "Je voule etre...." But he felt himself sliding into sleep and Rashid would understand anyway.

In his dream Ben found himself in a book lined study being interviewed by a large bull sitting at a desk littered with papers with a lattice window behind. The bull leaned back with his front hoofs crossed behind his head and peered at Ben over his spectacles. "So, my dear boy, what then is reality? You tell me you wish to fly and me," the bull paused to inhale his cigar. "And I tell you rule number one is detachment from reality. Followed by two and three: propulsion of self and reattachment to reality, but," Suddenly he leaned forward ominously and glared at Ben. "What if I told you I am a thief of reality? Ha ha ha!" he bellowed with laughter displaying a



magnificent set of bovine dentures. "I steal reality. Had you worried? Just for a moment. Admit. "He leaned back again comfortably in his swinging chair and gazed up at the ornate ceiling."But what is reality?" he mused. "Does it exist only because we are told it is so." He stared back at Ben." I defy that reality. That reality rules us, imprisons us, tortures our soul. Reality is a myth put about to keep us in check. You and I, we are illusions. "He snapped his hoof."Of course you can fly. These so called rules of nature, who made them, certainly not nature. Ask a butterfly its Latin name? Does it even know it's a "butterfly"? Reality has decided you are a pentadactyl eutherian primate but does this impress you, impose on you an undue responsibility, do you repeat it to yourself every day when you get up?" he scoffed, drawing heavily on his cigar and enveloping Ben in a cloud of tobacco smoke. "Glass of champers, dear boy," invited the genial bull through the smoke. "Krug, naturally," he said, his wet nostrils brooding over the top of the glass. And leaning forward confidentially,"he murmured," If you want my opinion. Reality, it's all a lot of bullshit! And the cow jumped over the moon. Ha, ha ha"

Next day Rashid announced they would be going up river to the Great Temple and after they had eaten they walked to the river and boarded an open boat with a white billowing sail. There were many of these boats sailing upstream resembling in the dawn light great swans asleep. After several miles they rounded a bend and came on a stupendous monument. An avenue of crouching stone lions led them to a ramp that passed through a massive gateway into a gallery with stone columns so high Ben had to crane his neck to see the open sky far above them. The pillars were covered with hieroglyphics depicting many things but among these as Rashid pointed out were those showing unusual sexual acts. "Ici, le temple ou dans les temps ancien," he whispered, "le pretre protege le monde from chaos . Tu comprends dans cette religion le nativite du monde est quand le Dieu Amun sucked his cock and spat out the sperm into the empty universe to become the stars and the sun. Chaque matin avant le soil brille, ici dans un chambre secret , les pretres performed this sacred act to ensure the sun would rise safely on its daily flight across the sky , that order would prevail and chaos be prevented."

Standing there in this strangely atmospheric place the world seemed altogether a different place.. Ben suddenly had the most peculiar vision, His friend the black bull wearing an ornate judicial whig was banging on the table before him crying "order, order!" while on long benches ranged on either side a host of unusual politicians were behaving in a most chaotic manner . For the members of this parliament were an extraordinary assortment of beasts and plants. The leader of the opposition was a large hawthorn tree, waving his thorny branches in all directions, there were geese honking as they brandished their order papers, a goat jostling a bramble that put out antagonistic tendrils at random, several octopuses waving all their arms as they argued and all the while the great black bolt on his speaker's throne snorting and crashing his hoof and demanding "Order! This house will come to order!" Only it was quite clear that order was not the natural law at all and that random chaos reigned and would, despite all the efforts of the honorable Mr. Speaker Bull, so continue. Ben came out of his reverie to see Rashid watching him curiously. He led the way to the boat. As they sailed back to the city he announced." maintenant il n'ya pas de religion . Seulment le mystere sacre. . At the heart of everything there is a sacred no thing ."he emphasised,"Regarde," And he pointed skywards to a lofty white cloud, "Nous comprends rien. Nous demeurons sur the clouds of the unknowing and that est sufficient."

