

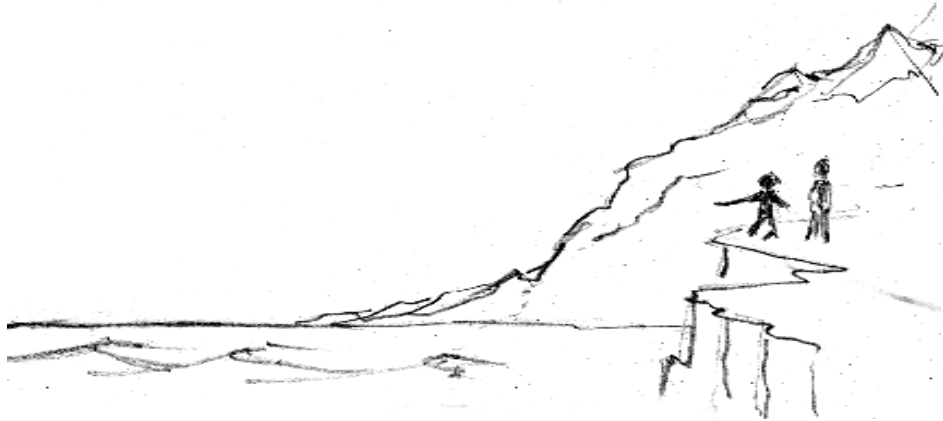
Ben returned to the city confused and troubled by it. He didn't want to have to think and now he was being forced to, but having no memory impaired his judgment. At the house the old man instantly understood his dilemma. "There was a philosopher who said that before he could think for himself he had to unlearn all he had been taught or told. That he would not believe even that the sand by the seashore was soft unless he had placed his foot in it." He smiled, "You are lucky, you have no prejudices or pre-conceived opinions to hinder you. You are the blank page." "I want to stay a blank page," Ben thought, "but I would like to fly," he added.

Next day he dreaded getting up for he wondered what Rashid might have planned. The news they would be going to the waterfall cheered him wonderfully but then Rashid added ominously that first he would have to go through the Empty Quarter and cross the Desert of Doubt. Ben looked hopefully at the old man but he said nothing and when he tried to read his thoughts he drew a blank. Although he was not yet fully aware of it, since he had been among people who communicated entirely by thought, his own senses were becoming more alert, as if wakening after a long sleep. When he moved among people in the streets he didn't just imagine what thoughts were passing between them, he knew. And it wasn't within the limitations and deceptions of words that he knew. The thoughts came clear as pictures and quite unhindered by any manipulation on his part. And he was also much more aware of himself at first when he had gazed at his image in the mirror he had seen a stranger and sometimes in moments of near panic wondered if he saw an enemy. But no longer. That had passed. Now when Rashid made his dire announcement, Ben knew what was in his mind even though the picture he got was very hazy.

"I will always love you as a little brother (galeel ach);" Rashid suddenly assured him as they prepared to depart. "Sabar al nur, morning of Light, Sabar al ward, morning of goodness." And now Ben felt reassured and confident. "Consider "his thoughts became apparent "to row up the dark river. That is the real journey. There I will find the source of the scream and be set free. Only where would it go when it left him, would it find another home another heart? What does a scream sound like", he wondered," when it is disconnected, cut off from its source. A sound that ends swiftly. Not the haunting echo of a temple gong or a tolling bell. Put all the billions and billions of screams ever uttered together and they will occupy no space at all. So take the memory of it," he instructed himself," take the scream, cup it between your palms and carry it to somewhere safe. A lotus lily perhaps and fold the petals over it and push it out over the water as an offering to the Gods of Fear and Retribution."

The old grandfather accompanied them to the square near the river where a workman was busy restoring an ancient mosaic, fitting in chips of colored stone and grinding the surface smooth with brick dust. As they approached he stood up and doused the mosaic with a bucket of water. The fog of dust instantly cleared to reveal a great staring face with large peering eyes and serpents for hair. The eyes seemed alive and watched them intently. Ben had the sensation as if they were explorers traveling among an archipelago of islands lost in the mist when suddenly it lifted and they glimpsed for a moment the other life, the life beyond the veil. Then the water dried, the fog returned, the islands vanished, that other life they were seeking remained a myth.

"We cannot avoid the events that will overtake us," warned Rashid as they set off. "Especially if we are going back, seeking the source. The forces of the future are waiting already to divert us."



Beyond the city they walked steadily towards distant snow capped mountains. Rashid rarely spoke. His expression was glum and his shoulders hunched as if he was burdened by cares. Ben by contrast felt light hearted. His initial disappointment at not going directly to the waterfall had given way to a different expectation. For even waterfalls had a source and as they plodded through the snowbound passes he found himself gazing upwards with confidence that whatever would be revealed to, hem would have a purpose.

They battled bitter winds and sheltered in shallow caves lying huddled together for warmth and Rashid muttered in his sleep, "si to ferme Las yeux qu'es ce tu vu?" And answering himself added to Ben's surprise, "Un ange et je travers le ciel bleu." Ben saw his eyes were open watching him, waiting for a reply. "I am a waterfall," Ben thought dreamily, "tumbling. I am the pool in the forest where we will all swim and be safe for ever." And Rashid hugged him and unexpectedly planted a cold kiss on his face."

Next morning Ben was woken by a distant exclamation of joy, and peering out from their shelter he saw Rashid standing at the crest of the pass waving his arms in excitement. Ben hurried to join him. But Rashid's elation had died. Far below a red and empty desert stretched away into illimitless distances. "It is the Empty Quarter," he announced tensely. "Janela do ceu (the window of heaven) he added bitterly.

The way down was easier than they expected, as if the desert was doing all it could to draw them to it. Ben wondered what lay on the other side, if there was one. In the dry heat they quickly shed the thick clothes they had worn in the mountains. Their water bottles were still full of melted snow and the dried fruit and biscuits they had brought from the city would be sufficient to sustain them for several days. But in the event the Empty Quarter was not quite as desolate as its name implied and Rashid's hollow joke as he stumbled up a dune, "Merde, we will drown in dreams of ice and fruit" was never put to the test, for as the evening of their first day settled about them they could see in the distance the remains of giant black stone embankments. Rashid stared in astonishment, "C'est vrai, crest le ancienne dam. And I thought it was only a legend." In the dusk they made their way through scattered thorn bushes to the base of a giant gateway fifty yards deep set at the end of a towering stone wall, there was writing cut into the stone, a flowing script that Rashid seemed to be able to read, except where it was defaced or worn away. "'And we destroyed the great dam,' " Rashid slowly read aloud. "'For the people did not pray, we turned their gardens into desert and their city into dust. Thorns and tamarisk only will grow here. All who do not pray are punished. Seek the truth and beset free.' "Rashid shivered. The desert wind tugged at their clothes and the very silence seem to howl. "Can we make a fire?" Ben suggested seeking out a sheltered spot. Suddenly the wind died away and splintered with a million stars the night sky spread out its vast majestic canopy overhead. "Mon dieu," exclaimed Rashid. Reaching up his hand as if to touch them.

When Ben woke up he found himself being scrutinized by a boy leaning on a stick. A small flock of sheep were nibbling at sparse tussocks of wiry grass and some goats perched among the stunted argan trees munching everything in reach. The boy was dressed in rags and his left foot was twisted. He held a sling in one hand and was constantly shifting his gaze to keep a wary eye over his flock. Rashid offered him some raisins and dried bread which the boy gobbled greedily." A salaam alaikum." Rashid said courteously but the boy was too busy eating to reply. Rashid needed a few words at least to get started but the boy seemed reluctant to say

anything. He kept staring at them, nervously fingering his sling. "Sodierk (friend)," tried Rashid and the Boy nodded and grinned. Suddenly he hobbled over to one of the sheep pulled a clay jar from his rags and squatting down proceeded to milk it. He handed them the warm milk which they swallowed eagerly. Rashid gestured to the ruins but the boy merely shrugged. Some distance away stood a rocky height they had not noticed the night before. It seemed pocked with caves and gesturing them to follow the boy made his way to them. Once inside they were lofty and cool. Old broken pots littered the ground and in one Ben found some crumbling parchment. Peering carefully he could just make out traces of faded writing. When Rashid pointed questioningly at the pots the boy merely laughed and shattered one with a blow from his stick. He sat at the entrance keeping a watch. On the far side of the valley from the ruins of the great dam Ben could see a cluster of black tents and after a while the boy rounded up his flock and started making his way home. At the tents a withered woman greeted them while little girls, their hands tattooed with henna peeped out from the folds of the tent. The boy entered and respectfully indicated a blind old man sitting erect on a mat. Ben and Rashid bowed. The man turned his milky eyes to them and reached up his hands to touch their faces. He seemed surprised. "You have come very far indeed," he exclaimed softly. "Not so far," said Rashid. "I speak in time, not distance," added the blind man. "This is the land of our forefathers." He declared quietly. "The land given to us to guard."



Ben produced the parchment he had taken from the cave and placed it in his hands. The old fingers touched it deftly and he nodded. "Alas now I cannot read," Rashid copied a line of the script in the dirt and traced the old man's finger across. He became suddenly alert, and a secretive smile crossed his face. "It is the ancient script from before our time when the mighty dam stood and the desert was an irrigated plain feeding the great city that stood here." He tapped the parchment and began to recite well-remembered verses. "In the beginning was No thing and out of No thing was created every thing. The Fullness of No thing dwelled in silence and that Silence contained the Word which was made flesh and dwells in us as we dwell in it." He paused. "In the ultimate stillness," he whispered, as if to himself "In the putting out of the flame in the stillness in the ultimate fulfillment." but his words faded and he seemed lost in a trance.

They quietly bowed their way out, only to discover that in the outer tent the boy's mother had prepared them some food, an earthenware dish of beans cooked in sheep's milk and flat loaves of bread to scoop it up. She smiled, watching them eat. Afterwards as they prepared to leave she indicated that the boy should go with them to guide them. Rashid seemed uncertain, but the boy laughed and tugged at his sleeve. The little sisters had already taken charge of the flock and with many a friendly wave they set off, but not before the boy had replenished his stock of sling stones. Despite his twisted foot the boy hobbled along as fast as them, and producing a simple flute from his rags cheered up the march with a tune. All day they walked steadily forwards sometimes crossing low dunes but more often sharp black gravel which must have been painful for the boy who was barefoot, but he hopped gamely over it. In the late afternoon the air felt more humid and a faint reflection along the horizon suggested water, although Rashid thought it was only a mirage. But the shimmer increased and grew steadily nearer and with it a blurred line of dark green which eventually became palm trees. "C'est an oasis," gasped Rashid, startled but delighted. The boy struck up a spritely tune on his flute and made as if to dance. They all laughed and started running forwards.

The palm trees skirted the nearer shore but the sheet of water was so vast they could not see beyond it. The boy led them through the lush undergrowth to a ramshackle jetty where to their astonishment they found Mobashu waiting.



"He has come to guard our escape," Rashid declared after a silent but intense discussion with Mobashu. The wizened hunter was waving his spear towards the west. "The westerners are invading," Rashid announced. "An advancing horde bent on replacing our culture and traditions. Mobashu is making a stand. The last civilized man between us and the barbarians." Ben frowned. What had happened to Fritz, he wondered. Rashid looked solemn. "Fritz has been captured. He was given the choice to recant his heretical views or be

declared insane. "He stared sadly at the ground and then raised himself proudly to his full five feet." "Let us salute a noble comrade." Mobashu dusted down his dinner jacket, perched himself on one leg and raised his spear in salute. "Honor to those in their lives who are committed," said Rashid delivering his homily "Never flinching from danger. Just and honorable in all they do. Never doubting for a moment their duty nor compromising their ideals Even though they foresee- as many do foresee that in the end the capitalist barbarians will storm this last citadel of the civilized world and social injustice will prevail and imprison us for evermore."

Mobashu started to chant a lament and when it faded into silence unhitched his spare spear and hurled it forward like a javelin. The flying blade seemed to shimmer like gold in the evening sun and then it plunged and fell quivering in the ground. Rashid murmured, "The warriors fell one by one. Their spears stand where they died in the dust. No one remembers them. Justice." Abruptly he turned and led the way along the jetty where a leaky canoe lay moored, half awash with water. The boy started to bail with a half coconut shell and Ben picked up the only paddle, but Rashid sat silent and stared irresolutely ahead." We have entered the jenela do ceu ," he muttered. As Ben paddled forwards onto the open mere he could still glimpse Mobashu standing guard on the bank. He assumed there could be no going back.

Rashid suddenly raised his hand. The crippled boy was busy baling. Ben followed Rashid backward glance. Puffs and plumes of dust were raised along the desert horizon. "They are coming. You cannot see them yet the battalions of golf buggies and soft drink salesmen, but we cannot abandon our comrade. Mes amts I appeal to your sense of duty and of dignity. If we do not also make a stand the stain of dishonor will torment our peace of mind for evermore."

Ben carefully manouevred the listing canoe back to the landing stage where Mobashu watched their arrival . In silence he distributed his assortment of weapons handing Ben a hunting club and Rashid a spear. The boy already possessed his sling but Mobashu added a bow and arrows. They spread out. Rashid peered into the western front and conferred with Mobashu. "Voila," he exclaimed excitedly, "There are three attack groups in the first wave. In the centre is the Hollywood junk film cavalry. Massed cohorts of the Junk food industry control the right flank, and the Junk bond infantry the left. Behind them among the second wave are the regiments of tubular Michelin tyre men and coca -cola cans. Mes amiss" he concluded gravely. "I do not have to remind you that civilization expects each of us to do his duty. Bon chance."

They did not have long to wait for the barbarians to confront them. From the centre a tall gangly man mounted on horseback and dressed as a cowboy rode forward between two similarly dressed riders bearing aloft a plackard that declared



"Marlborough Country," and under it in smaller letters the message, "A man without a fag is not a man", signed Texan proverb. In an unusually drawling drawl he announced "I call on you-all to lay down you arms and surrender to the sovereignty of Kingsize Marlboroughs."

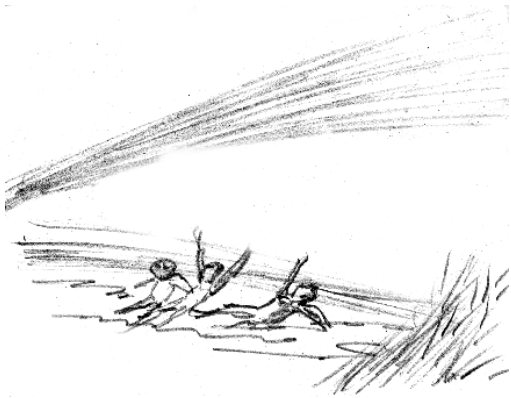
Rashid reply was to spit on the ground. "Je crasherai sur to tombe!" he yelled flinging his spear and beheaded one of the row of mounted Oscars lined up behind. Battle commenced.

Confronted by a phalanx of chariots bearing white plastic statues of the junk food prophet Colonel Sanders with his white stetson and goatee beard Ben let rip with his hunting club. Effigy after effigy disintegrated before his sudden fury. But no sooner had he despatched the Kentucky fried chicken warriors than on came the Macdonald hamburger clowns. Meanwhile on the other flank the shepherd boy was loosing his sling at the Junk bond market makers resplendent in jackets illuminated with flashing lights showing the constantly changing stock market figures. This mystifying hazard did not intimidate the boy. Stock after stock crashed bankrupt and senseless to the ground as his slingshots met their mark. Several tall men on stilts dressed in red and blue stars and stripes and wearing top hats tried to come to their aid but Mobashu shot their wooden struts from under them, This destruction and desecration of their effigies left the capitalist barbarians dismayed and reeling. Some of their leaders tried to spur them forward with cries of "Big Macs for ever, Dunkin Doughnuts, Wall street....." But even these spurs to the pride could not deflect the resolution of the staunch defenders of the civilized world.



Suddenly from the confused ranks of the Hollywood brigade stepped forward a big man with a cowboy hat, a gun holster around his hip and spurs clapped to his boots. He approached with a rather graceful swagger. "Now you boys," he announced. "I'm going to count to three and draw." but even his 'lightning action' was no match for Mobashu who flung forward a net that captured and pinioned the hefty gunman to the ground. "That's not in the script," he yelled as he struggled to get free. "Reshoot the scene, bring on the stunt men." But his pleas were in vain. Instead he began to expand as if puffed up by some powerful cinematographic ego and shouting such cries as 'Alamo for ever!' and 'true grit' he burst like an inflated balloon into so much hot air. The sight of their exploded myth so unnerved the tinsel town brigade that it vanished as if it had gone with the wind, and without the hard core of their hopes and beliefs any enthusiasm for pursuing the fray faded and the barbarians turned tail and fled.

Weary but triumphant Rashid gathered his comrades in arms around him. "We have set our standard in the sand," he declared. "We have said enough and no further. And now we must go on. Our quest is essential. Only Mobashu will remain. One day tales will be told of his heroism. The day when a single man of true faith confronted the massed ranks of the corrupt world. For they will be back. The barbarians will be back. And Mobashu is making the ultimate sacrifice of the civilized man against them." Unaffected by these remarks Mobashu unloosed his ear lobes and dusted down his dinner jacket with a frayed name tag that read E.Hemingway. He gathered his weapons together and stowed them about him. His ebony body glistened with sweat. Rashid viewed him with admiration. "One does not need to wash to carry a spark of the divine within one's soul," he declared as once more they prepared to embark in the leaking canoe. Only this time Rashid fixed his gaze firmly ahead and did not look back." life and death are only temporary," Ben heard him murmur, "but freedom goes on for ever."



As he paddled Ben suddenly had a flash of revelation as if his memory briefly stirred back to life. He was kneeling beside a blown-up boy trying to staunch the bleeding, trying ineffectually to push back inside his spilled out guts. Sweat from fear and panic dripped off him onto the boy's face whose pleading eyes watched him intently. Ben could hear voices arguing close by and looking up saw the shadows of two military figures stark against the dazzling sunlight. "This boy is our hero" one said, "in our fight for freedom." "No," declared the other. "He is our martyr in our struggle against your terrorism." "We are not terrorists we are freedom fighters," insisted the first. "You are the terrorists. You kill and maim our people, innocent victims

like this child." "We are only defending our right for security." claimed the first. What about your suicide bombers?" "They sacrifice their lives to defend our liberty, our right to self-determination." Ben turned back to the boy he was cradling. The eyes of the dying boy gazed up staring from one shadow to the other. "Is he dead yet," a voice demanded. "I have our flag to drape over his body, to be stained by his martyr's blood." "No!" shouted the other. "I have our flag. I claim him as our hero. "The shadows leaned down to question the boy." "Who do you belong to?" they demanded. But it was too late. His Childs face stiffened in death. On one man's black shirt was the slogan 'No victors only victims'. His opponent carried the inscription 'Hey, who really shot the Pope?' The vision blanked out. Only the placid empty surface of the evening mere stretched out all around them. Ben went on paddling.

Later as dusk enveloped them and the sheet of open water seemed to expand to infinity under the night sky Ben quietly paddling revisited his earlier vision. Now on reflection he realized that although it may have been memory, it had been meddled with. The dying boy was real enough, he was sure of that, but the shadowy figures were opinions and he did not know whose. For even though he assumed he must had had opinions he could not recall any, but what impressed him most was how finely balanced they were, as though seated at opposite ends of the see-saw facing one another were right and right, or wrong and wrong Ben could not tell which, but definitely not right and wrong . So, he considered carefully, if opposing opinions could seem so equal did that apply to truth itself? Ben had no concept of what truth meant that was what they were here to seek, and perhaps it was all an illusion but what if there were different truths, opposite but equally valid? Then they would be like explorers paddling up a great river to discover its source only to find countless confusing tributaries where each stream might lead them to a different beginning.

"We are sinking!" the boy's cry brought Ben back to reality. It was true; the canoe was awash with water pouring in at every rotten seam. The boy cried out, "I cannot swim. I cannot swim!" Rashid seemed unconcerned. If anything he was elated. His eyes gleamed with expectation. "We will float. The lake will sustain us. Trust it." And as the rotten remains of the canoe collapsed and sank under them Ben, supporting the boy, found himself floating on the water while a blazing light started to shine with the force of a great wind across the lake. This beam of light blew past them. "let go, let go!" cried Rashid and vanished in the flow of light and Ben who until that moment was unaware that with his free hand he had been gripping desperately onto the space around him, followed and together with the boy found himself tossed and flung sideways by the blinding light until they were brought to a halt in a dense bed of tall reeds. At once the light lessened and the force that had hurled them far across the inland sea faded, leaving them breathless and floundering amid a dense tangle of waterweed. Forcing a way forward they waded towards the shore where a lantern twinkled as if to beckon them. A burly man holding it viewed their



approach. "You'll need a rest I expect," he said considerately, "travelers generally do when they come across the water. So sit you down and I'll fetch something to refresh you."

They found themselves outside a simple tavern with no walls but just a thatch roof propped up on bamboo posts and some wooden benches on which they sank gratefully. A torn poster pinned to a post showed a steam train, a sand beach and a small smiling girl with long curly hair and a bucket and spade. 'Something (torn off) by the sea' it announced. The man set down three coconuts with the tops cut open and they gulped them dry. The man regarded them kindly, "I knew you'd be thirsty," he said.



"Where are we?" asked Rashid. The man seemed puzzled "You're here. Isn't it what you expected?" He thought for a moment. "There are hammocks if you want them, but most folks push straight on up the hill." He peered at Ben, "I daresay your friends are expecting you." He nodded. "There's a moon rising and the path through the forest is clear enough if you tread carefully. You'll hear the waterfalls but be careful not to slip on the stones. "He turned his attention to the boy," Now this lad's expected on the summit by dawn. "He studied his lame leg." Don't fret there's steps up to the pagoda and a rail to help you. Now, I don't want to rush you, but you'd better be going. Doesn't do to be late for appointments does it? "He grinned at Rashid," Especially if you're 'le petit guide'. "He led them behind the but and up some steps cut in a steep bank." Here's the path. Follow your noses and good luck." With that he turned back taking the lantern with him and leaving them standing uncertainly on a rutted mud path. The forest loomed overhead but the moon had risen and they could faintly make out the way forwards. Somewhere far ahead they could hear the sound of wind rushing through the trees and Ben suddenly realized it was the waterfall. The closer they came the louder it sounded; roaring, falling, tumultuous, overwhelming. The draught of wind it caused almost blew them off their feet, the slender trees were bent double by the blast and then suddenly the moon rose in the sky and they saw the falls, taken aback by their sheer magnificence. For the wall of water seemed to plunge in a solid plume of white spray sheer out of the sky above. "Inscrutable" exclaimed Rashid in a hushed whisper, for the cascading tumult seemed somehow sacred, and they kneeled humbly before it. Ben found the boy tugging at his arm. "I have to go on" he said, "please help me for I am afraid." Ben had no choice. Even though he sensed he had reached the source and could willingly stay there for ever, yet he knew he had a greater duty by the boy. They started once again up the path only this time Rashid brought up the rear. But although the path did not seem so steep yet every step was an ever increasing effort. Although there was no wind there seemed to be a force thrusting against them, physically forcing them back. This time it was the boy who desperately led the way, pulling the others after him, using his wooden crutch to find a grip or to bring a branch within their grasp. Slower and slower they labored uphill until suddenly just when they despaired of ever reaching the summit they saw a pagoda black against the white north sky, very beautiful and still and from the darkness they heard a night bird's mocking cry. Suddenly the force that had held them back now let them go. They stumbled exhausted up a short flight of steps and flung them down on the grass. As Ben looked around him he saw the boy stepping into the open pavilion of the pagoda. He moved to the far side, outlined against the graying sky. Ben wearily got to his feet just as the dawn sun rose like thunder casting everything before it into a radiant golden glow. The boy seemed to shimmer as Ben watched him cast down his crutch and raise his open hands to the heavens. In

response a tumultuous cry rose up unseen from below. As he stepped anxiously forward Ben was astonished to see that beyond the pagoda the hillside plunged down to a great plain where a million of more massed figures were kneeling, raising up their arms and chanting. Chanting? What were they chanting? One word repeated and repeated and it sounded so familiar somehow. Ben wanted to reach the boy but some inner sense held him back. The boy did not need them any more. Lame no longer he stepped gracefully forwards over the edge of the drop and soared slowly down to the waiting multitude below. Then as he seemed to reach them a dense mist rolled in blanking off the plain and hiding everything from view. Even the chanting was muffled into silence. Rashid who had been staring down joined Ben. "Voila. Le rave. Qu'es ce qua to fats devenu? Moi....." But Ben did not stay to hear he found himself rushing headlong back down the steps, down the hillside, down, down towards the waterfall. But it was not there. For a moment he doubted his eyes and, eagerly he listened but there was no sound. Only silence.

Ben turned round. He saw Rashid regarding him solemnly. "What is the point of all this!" he found himself shouting. "What is the point..." The echo "all this... all this..." came ricocheting back, to taunt him, the sheer enormity of the hazardous journey they had come through finally threatened to overwhelm him. "Why, why?" He demanded. Cities, deserts, wars, forests, "It means nothing!" he cried. "Nothing. And all this time we have been going nowhere!" Ben slumped wretchedly to the ground.

"Trust me," she said, embracing his body like a tree- its branches and leaves bent over him revealing like a gate, a bower he wished he would enter. "I am not faith or hope or love even," she murmured. "Simply trust. But will you enter and find the path that will lead you from terror to truth." Who said who spoke?

Overhead whined the roaring thunder of the helicopter gunship thrashing the palm fronds like a hurricane. Ben who had dived for shelter beneath an abandoned stilt but on the beach starting running back towards the ruins of the hotel Estrella. Exploding mortars had already demolished the tile roof and the upper floor. The power station had been blown up and in the dark Ben ran down the street from one shuttered window to the next just praying aloud that the helicopter would stay hidden above the palms and not see him. Suddenly his desperate fingers clawed a shutter open and he hurled himself over the sill to land in pitch dark on top of a naked hairy sweating body. Horrified he leaped off and groped for the door and flung himself into the roofless hallway where volunteers had tried to build a shelter from tables and chairs.

"Trust me?" she whispered in his ear, inviting him to follow her pale form along the forest path to the waterfall.

"Je voudrais faire, je voudrais faire," he heard Rashid distantly pleading.

As he stumbled on, clutching the dead boy in his arms, half blinded by his own tears, he glanced at the boy's face, the frozen half parted lips that could never again utter, 'je voule etre, je voudrais devenu.....' Perhaps they have found your dreams, he said, holding the broken body of Rashid as he laid him gently down. "Vos raves. Mon petit guide. Tous les peches dansent dans le mar." And what did you promise in return? He reminded himself. "A waterfall where we will be safe for ever."

Ben sat slumped on the ground and felt Rashid's hand on his shoulder. "We have left that behind," he said quietly. "We have left all that behind. We have crossed over. The rules no longer apply. Chaos maybe, random choices. No thing No where. Do not expect any discoveries, any solutions, we have left them behind. Only when we





have achieved nothing will..." his voice faded. "Nothing!" Ben shouted to the gin like a trees as she vanished ahead of him, a pale form floating into the darkness of the forest. "No one," her words came faintly back to him, a lure or a declaration? He turned despairingly to Rashid, "We have lost everything." And it was no consolation to hear Rashid reply, "We must lose everything. To go further we have to lose everything. But myself, my own personality I cannot lose. In that you are luckier than L" But Ben wasn't listening. He was bitten; regretting losing the waterfall that had seemed like a sacred fulfillment. He turned on Rashid. "You said you would show me the way without and within." His words froze in him. He had nothing more to say. "I have led, have I not," Rashid replied. "I have shown you without; a society without money, without words, without anything unnecessary. As for within have we not also been there together. Only now it is I who can go no further. The journey to no thing can only be accomplished by no thing. Detachment from reality is not enough, you must abandon personality, you must deny your very existence, " he gazed fondly at Ben, "Believe me I love you like a little brother- 'galeel ach', and you are better placed than me to lead, for you have no history, or what you have you have lost already. I, alas, cannot get rid of me. It is the very fabric of my being, layers upon layers of day to day experiences building us into what we are. I can only stop and look out. I can only rest my soul in trust on the' clouds of the unknowing." Sadness filled his eyes. And Ben put his arm around his shoulder and drew him close to him and pressed his face fondly against the boy's tousled hair. He wondered what had become of the shepherd boy and Mobashu. Are they gone too or do they live on as symbols or as prophets. He could not recall a prophet, but in some distant and vague memory he watched the women of the village wrapped in their black shawls brandishing aloft the shell cases and the burned out rockets from the rebel raid, carrying banners that read "Mothers of the revolution remember ure martyred sons." And he had seen and heard the clamor of the vast crowd welcoming the boy as he descended to them from the dawn pagoda. What did he say to them and what did they expect, from him?

"I have to give up everything," he realized. "Even you, Rashid, friend of my heart. Even you," he whispered deep into the core of his soul, "even you my soul, wherever and whatever you are."

He sat there alone and still. He had no recollection of time passing, whether it was minutes, hours, days, weeks. He gazed into nothing with no thought or sensation to disturb him. He was unaware of his own body, even of his own existence. No whisper came subtly to him murmuring "I am," or even "I am not." In the realm where he dwelled there was neither word nor silence. There was neither being nor unbeing, neither caring nor not caring. He entered into tree and rock, into wind and rain, Sky Sea, calling, soaring, and he entered none of them, for although he was, yet nothing touched him, as if he was not.

He looked up, a youth stood nearby regarding him. He reminded Ben of the watchers. He was sitting on the edge of a meadow around which a stream flowed noisily over shallow pebbles. Wooded hills rose up beyond. The youth pointed up hill. To Ben's surprise he spoke. "If we climb up the stream we will reach Mela Dola." "What is that?" Ben asked. "My grandfather's house is there. His gardens also. Mela Dola is at the heart of everything. Only the wise live there. Otherwise it is forbidden to go." Ben thought of asking 'why are you taking me,' except he knew. Deep down, he knew. It felt as if he had traveled to no where and arriving found it to be everywhere. He got up and followed the youth who announced himself as Safrudin.

Ben was barefoot and virtually naked. Safrudin wore a once-white sarong tucked up around his waist. They crossed the stream and walked beneath some dark leafed trees from where children's laughter sounded hidden in the foliage and small brown fruits cascaded down. Safrudin chuckled and handed some to Ben, who broke open the skin to reveal creamy sweet segments. He crammed one after another into his mouth as he walked. Palm fronds rose like a canopy on each side. They stepped through and reached another bend in the stream and followed this between tall ancient trees until they emerged at a big deep pool delved partly under the rocks and fed by a cascade of pluming water. There were boys diving off the rocks. They swam across the pool, pulled themselves up onto a ledge and grabbing old roots emerged above the pool where the stream tossed and plunged between great rocks. Safrudin led on, deep into the heart of the mountain. The stream divided and they went up the lesser branch to a jade green pool where a waterfall fell in a fine spray between overhanging fronds of leaves. And then back again to the main stream, more rocks, more pools, more cascades, some plunging into dark ravines, others breaking lightheartedly into welcoming shallows that invited them to dive into crystal depths. Some of the pools had names; gaja, air si bada, scioppi, si puringi, and each one was special in its own way. Some were no more than small basins scooped from the solid rock fed by a jet of sparkling water, another was deep and somber and grand with a cascade that plunged seventy feet casting a great draught of wind and plumes of fine spray sparkling with rainbows. Behind one pool a backdrop of white water sluiced down a slide of smooth rock creating a carpet of foam and spray in which they dived among a multitude of bursting bubbles. Other pools were quite still with gold and silver sand glittering like a treasure trove waiting only for their groping fingers to unravel as they soared down into the clear depths. From some pools they made their way up jumping from one rock to the next, but to reach others they had to claw, their hands tugging at the roots of trees and clutching climbers. Always they moved upwards until they reached a path that led them to a pretty thatch- roof bridge with planks to rest on before taking the steep climb ahead. Sometimes they inched along ledges clutching perilously for support while the stream gurgled dangerously among deep gullies far below, other times Ben wondered whether the sheer steepness of the climb would defeat him, his bare feet slipping or catching on snares. But always Safrudin waited patiently for him to catch up. Once resting in a glade beneath a soaring tree dozens of small bright yellow butterflies descended on him, covering his body from head to toe. Then as they climbed higher on the uppermost slopes of the mountain the trees fell back to reveal a view below and beyond of the open sea studded with palm fringed atolls and far off the jagged peaks of a misty offshore island on the horizon.



The flanks of the forest closed in around them once again. The narrow path zigzagged treacherously up into a dense grove of swaying palm trees -the tallest and slenderest Ben had even seen. The path leveled. They stepped between cultivated rows of beans, hanging in clusters from tripods of cut branches. A big wooden but on low stilts stood to open side. The door was ajar. Safrudin climbed in and opened the windows. The room was quite bare. In an adjoining room was a fireplace with blackened stones, and some pots hung up. In the main room Safrudin unrolled a mat. From a corner he extracted a small stringed instrument and sat in the open doorway strumming it while Ben lay back contented, his weariness washed away. The music of the mandolin stole over him and he closed his eyes. Now he realized that although he had lost everything he had found it anew and richer, the perfect waterfalls, the perfect music, and the perfect peace. He didn't have to wait on the clouds of the unknowing. Later when he got up Safrudin no longer sat framed in the



open doorway but the tune he had hummed still floated in the air. Ben saw his own image reflected in a broken piece of mirror. The face that stared back was no longer a stranger but a friend. A montage of faces melded together, childhood, boyhood, youth..... and although they were faces out of a past that no longer belonged to him they did not pose a threat. They were not an enemy. He had nothing to be afraid of within himself and he feared no invasion from his past. As for the future it didn't exist, the future and present were one. The rules of space and time no longer seemed to apply. Although Safrudin had left, his presence like his music was still there. On the floor a simple meal was laid out. And a beaker of water that tasted like a draught fresh from the cascade of the sacred spring itself. Now he knew that nothing was not nothing for it possessed within its infinite recourses a completeness and fulfillment of which anything and everything were but tiny used fragments.

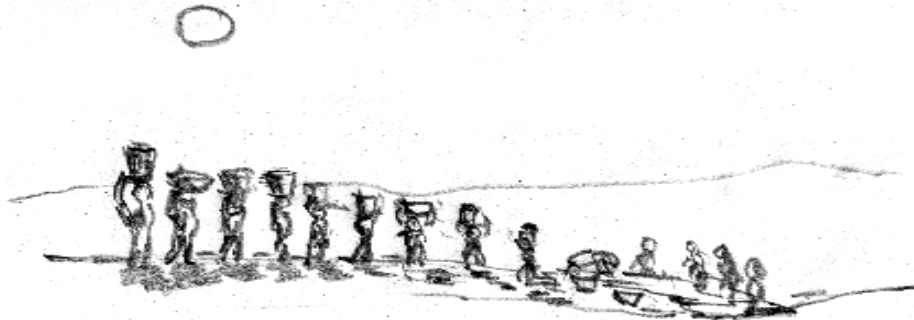
Later that same day, or perhaps it was the next, for Ben - if he was Ben, had lost count of time and of whereabouts, went for a walk. He discovered a muddy path that led rather reluctantly it seemed by the way it curved and dipped, hesitated, ceased, started again, down through the forest. Sometimes the trees thinned and Ben could faintly see a deep broad valley backed by a tumbled line of distant mountains. One in particular held his attention for it soared like the cone of great volcano. Framed in a space between the trees Ben sat on a log and watched it. A river shone far below in the sunlight as it wound through the jungle. It seemed to come out of the heart of the mountain.

Ben felt an urge to climb the mountain, to stand alone on its peak, and now that he had reached this decision the path seemed to conspire to help him, guiding him in easy stages to the river where near the bank perched among the mossy spreading branches of a giant rain tree stood a large thatched, and verandah treehouse. A sign on the trunk read "The Golf Club" and beside it hanging from a rope a tray with a bottle of Gordons gin, another of Indian tonic water, a dish of ice, another of lemon slices and two glasses. A voice hailed him from above. "Pull the dumb waiter up will you, dear. And come up yourself." Round the back of the tree Ben discovered a staircase spiraling upwards and made his way onto the platform where he found an elderly lady wearing a big taffeta hat arranging the drinks on a table. "So glad you could come, dear." She glanced out at the lowering sun. "I know it's not exactly over the yard-arm but never mind." She sat back and sipped her drink. "Oh, my dear, the old days, how I remember them. Used to have elephant races on the lawn. Happy days. "She gazed at Ben." "I don't suppose you play Bridge do you? But then it'd be hard to make a four. Mobashu's a dear, and you know he's resplendent in his dinner jacket with his ear lobes tied up. But he's hopeless at calling. Ernest never could teach him to call. And he does rather regard a game of bridge as if he was waiting to spear a kudu at a salt lick. Still who can blame him? "She raises a pince-nez and subjected Ben to a careful scrutiny." "And why exactly are you here?" Ben pointed to the mountain, now silhouetted as a great black cone against the evening sky. The lady laughed. "Papamanchua. You can't go there, my dear. Strictly off limits. Home of the Gods. Our modern day Mount Olympus. "She poured herself another generous gin." "And the family squabbles they have up there! At night, you should just see the lighting flashes... 'Goo's are arguing again', says Mobashu. Oh, no dear, you can't go up there. You'd be turned into a pig or something equally unpleasant. The mountain's full of pigs and the river's full of crocodiles. All white hunters I expect. All my old bridge companions. My dear, we used to have half a dozen tables. I can't tell you the gin we got through. Use to drop the empty bottles over into the undergrowth. Must be heaps down there? I never go down anymore,

you see. Can't managed the stairs. Still I can see all the world from up here and Mobashu looks after me. I don't suppose you've got a spare collar to go with his D.J.?" And then she vanished and Ben found himself back in the but in Mela Dola with Safrudin sitting in the doorway playing the mandolin and a steaming meal of scented rice set before him. As he ate Ben wondered about the people he met in his imagination. He was sure they existed. But he wondered if he dwelled in their thoughts as they did in his?

After supper he asked Safrudin about the mountairf whose name he had forgotten. But Safrudin did not reply directly. "Why try to imagine there are God's. Imagine instead a sacred mystery, the source of all creation. Accept this. There is no need to go some place to worship it, for it dwells within us. It is a part of us just as we are a part of it. Crea-tor and the Crea-tures. Consider the hypocrisy of worshipping our Creator if afterwards we go and eat or destroy its Creatures. Worship should be a way of life, how we care for nature and one another."

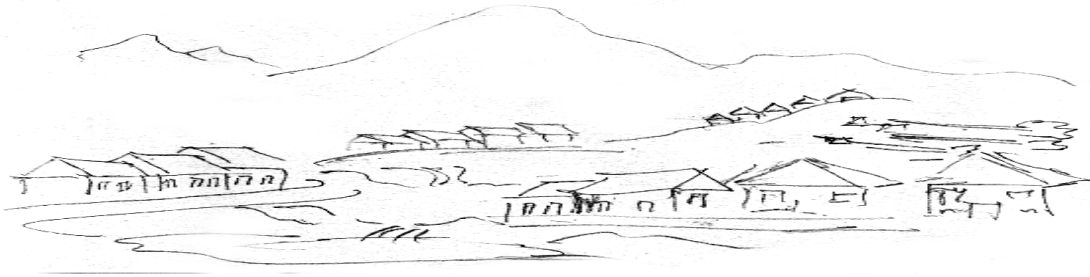
"Are you my teacher?" Ben inquired timidly, but Safrudin laughed. "Of course not. You are your own teacher if you wish to be: I simply plays the mandolin but the tune is not mine. Where it comes from and where it goes to I do not know. But it is my friend and when it soars like the great birds soar above the mountain peaks it carries my soul with it." Then he added," But in answer to your question I am a steward, one of the stewards in the realm of creation where no mighty thing or event is more worthy than a lesser and in my nature I am more a listener than a speaker just as you are a water lover, Aquarius." "Is that my secret nature? All this is a mystery to me." "This is intended. It is not for you to know the Knower. Your gift is your lack of knowledge, it offers you a vision few others possess." "To know nothing?" queried Ben. "When nothing is everything," Safrudin replied. "Come with me. I do not command as a fool or a would-be well-wisher. I say only come." Ben nodded. "You will see many things amiss," Safrudin promised," but you will say nothing. Neither in praise nor in condemnation." Ben nodded.



"We will go to a far country that is fertile but where the people are starving, where clean water is plentiful but they suffer thirst. Where once the soil yielded abundance and the whole land prospered but where now the fields lie untilled and all are destitute." Ben made no comment.

So they came to a country where they saw people walking wearily in line to fill cans of filthy fetid water which they later sieved through cloth and boiled to kill the smell, while in a village clean water gushed from a pump- but only for those who had coins to pay. But the people were penniless.

Then they saw the earth up-rooted by great excavating machines and the rocks crushed and treated with poisonous chemicals to release a few specks of precious metal."This is the decision of the global planner," the people told them. "We are powerless in our own country. The global planners control our destiny. And while they make their decisions in the luxury of their hotels, served drinks at the poolside, while they juggle the global finances, it is our destiny to starve, for our children to be denied an education we cannot afford, for our fields to lie barren and toxic, and for our chiefs to be stripped of their traditional powers. For the great rich barons of the global concerns make the rules and have all the correct answers. They use clever persuasive language like "no subsidies" "balanced budgets" "Cash crops for export only" "No trade barriers" "Freedom of access for foreign investment" "No restrictive practices but they never come to our villages. They assure us they have our well-being as their primary concern but they do not have to walk five miles carrying a



pail of stinking water on their head, they do not have to scratch the dirt for roots, or strip the thorn trees for berries, or eat dung beetles for supper, and sometimes raw earth itself to take away the gnawing pangs of hunger. Oh, yes, they know the rules, for they made them, without our consent, but they do not have to suffer the consequences. Is this justice?" But despite this appeal Ben said nothing.

"Rise up a million, rise up a billion people and drive these parasites into the sea," challenged the young men. "We have been humiliated long enough. We have been persecuted and forced off our ancestral lands and our sacred sites pillaged. Rise up and drive these tyrants and terrorists of finance and exploitation into the sea and take back that which is ours, ours for countless generations without need for any title deeds so beloved by crooked lawyers. Rise up and drive the lawyers and teachers, the merchants and financiers, the ministers and presidents, the judges and the military, the corrupt policemen and the corrupted arbitrators and all the devisers of their self made rules, into the sea. And let us rebuild our villages and re grows our crops and sow our seeds and barter at our small weekly markets and let the land which has been plundered prosper again."

And Safrudin the steward led Ben silently away." Where do you want to go?" "To the waterfall," Ben replied. "You maybe disappointed," Safrudin said, but it was not until they arrived that Ben understood. At the foot of the valley the river had been dammed, the forest torn down and a huge ice factory built. Uphill construction crews were busy with chain saws and bulldozers. Roads and houses were under construction. The river and the waterfalls were unrecognizable having been channeled to pretty an ornamental, park... Ben was aghast. "Why have you allowed this to happen ?" he turned to Safrudin only to find he was not there, and his empty words echoed harmlessly back from the barren valley walls.



While he was standing there some policemen in uniform came up and demanded his papers. They led him to a courthouse that was being hastily completed. Outside workmen were painting an elaborate sign that read "Presumption of Innocence." "What does this mean?" A policeman asked, but there was no one who could answer. Ben was led inside and faced a black-robed magistrate who Ben recognized as the black bull only now he was wearing a white judicial wig between his horns... A court official read out the charges. "You are charged with crimes against humanity, and for political and religious subversion" declared the black bull studying

him carefully." My dear boy, how do you plead?" "I can remember nothing," Ben answered. "That is no defense," declared magistrate Bull. "Call in the witness." A court usher approached bearing a large steel suitcase on wheels. "Do you recognize this?" the bull demanded. Ben nodded. "So that loss of memory excuse really is a load of' bull'. Open the case," he called out. But instead of the collected works of Marx, Engels, Mao Ze Dung and others, there was only a rather stale-looking cheese sandwich. The black bull was nonplussed." Put down 'guilty' ", he declared, " Have you anything to add," he asked, but Ben said nothing. The black bull peered at him over his spectacles: "I sentence you to be taken to a place where you will be suspended midway between sound and silence, between knowing and not knowing, between nothing and everything. In addition I sentences you to no hope and no trust and above all no dreams." He dismissed the case and turning to the packed court declared, "donaci fuori del sonno la pace,"(grant me beyond sleep serenity), and uttered a loud imperious bellow.

Just as Ben was about to be led away the magistrate appeared to have a change of heart." Stop!" he intervened and waving a hoof ordered the police guards to step

back while he took from the ample folds of his legal robes a small disposable camera and handed it to Ben. "Take this," he instructed, "and bring me back one photograph of the truth. Meanwhile, Sentence suspended," he announced to the court clerk. He called out to Ben, "Mr. Whatever-your-name-is, one snap will do. One snap of the truth and you'll be free. Trust me." And with a majestic toss of his horns and brandishing his raised hoof, he marched off.

If you can take with you one view, one memory, one verse, one bar of music, one.... What will that be? You must do the packing only remember this. You are not coming back. So do not discard it so swiftly. Do not discard love for no one will ever love you again, no one will ever again reach across in the night and hold your hand. No one will ever think of you in that way, care for you in that special protective, possessive way. When you leave you will be stepping into the Empty Quarter where creation may seem a cruel betrayal. Is that where you really wish to belong?

Don't be too hasty

The view from the crooked pine at the end of the tennis court looked across the valley to the blue saucer of the bay between white chalk headlands. The faint far off hush of the sea and closer the familiar sounds of people playing croquet, the knock of the mallet, the scent of new mown lawn. Looking out across the desert from the mountain pass beyond Sana'a to the Empty Quarter seven thousand feet below stretching to infinity. Clutching a leather bag of newly minted Maria Teresa silver dollars to pay for protection among the armed desert tribes. Looking out. From the grassy knoll at the end of the Lomita hills, Mobashu resting on his spear. Below us the Naguramen escarpment like a green ledge plunging into the rift valley and the white salt caked lake Natron fringed with the pink shore of a million flamingoes. Betrayal? If you are not there. If I am not there. Can we both go back by separate ways to the same memory? Yes. Then we shall meet. And your eyes shall melt into all the eyes that ever stared so intently into mine, and your touch will be all those overlapping touches, your caress as if all the seas of the world were in that one small wave lapping onto the shore of my soul and when I enter you and travel within you we are setting off for unknown shores, for islands where the moon turns the bay into silver and night birds sing in the silent trees. You say you only want things that you can discard without being concerned about their loss. Within the Palace of Winds will your cheek not still wish to tremble at the soft breath of love for if you break it, snap it, crush it beneath your heel you will never bring it back to life again? And the eyes that loved you may in their look rebuke or condemn, and the hand that reached out to touch thrust you off instead.

So, my friend, amico, sodierk, somlan, pooen, philos, you will not find me in your looking. From the tennis court of your empty childhood what were the eyes in your heart seeking? As a young man discovering the source of the Olibotoi river high among the green hills of Africa, what were the eyes in your hope seeking. Or standing high above the pass watching the Empty Quarter staring implacably back, offering you nothing, nothing but a challenge. And the eyes that you pass in the road, eyes that watch you for a moment as you briefly cross their world and they pass by yours. Eyes that haunt you forever. That brief plea for help that you ignored and now too late can never redeem. Go.

But what was it. What were they chanting? All the millions. What did they know? Ben demanded that he did not. And what did the boy say to them. How could a simple ragged cripple know?

He didn't know. The 'no thing' within him knew. Was it stillness? Why can't you understand? You don't need to know to understand. The waterfall is just a rope suspended. A rush of stillness connecting heaven with earth. A symbol.

It is contained within an invisible casket in the most inaccessible heart of the universe. Imagine if somewhere in the source of the universe is a soul. Somewhere nowhere. Imagine if somewhere in the heart of everyone, of everything is the same nothing. Now Go.



Under the trees ahead just off the path the three boys and the girl mounted on their ponies waited for him to catch up. The girl smiled and pointed up where a steep zigzagging track led them through a ruined village half buried by the encroaching forest. Ben noticed faded signs that announced Post Office, The Hill Club, even a ruined school perched on a spur overlooking the valley far below. For a moment Ben had the strange sensation he had been here before, then he dismissed it as nonsense. Apart from some wild mountain goats and a black bull the place was utterly deserted and looked as if it had been abandoned for many many years. The track continued upwards towards the ruins of an ancient hill fort perched on a high crag but skirting this they passed on as if across some invisible boundary for now ahead the landscape seemed lush, and the sky filled with flocks of birds that seemed to draw them onwards like a motley army of heralds announcing their approach to every tree and glade, every tumbling stream and silven valley. And Ben seemed to hear a faint ringing in his ears as if a million silvery belts were calling. Always the companions urged him on and sometimes the girl rode beside him and he sensed the sudden thrill of the touch of her thigh on his.



All day and all night they rode on and at daybreak found themselves approaching a small village set beside a meadow where a stream flowed in a wide curve. Here they dismounted some people emerged from the stilt houses and greeted them with friendly smiles and embraces. At the stream women were washing clothes on the stones and two men were carving a dug-out canoe. As they stood there Ben saw a white sail gliding towards them over the green tips of a rice field and soon an outrigger canoe came into sight. The gin beckoned and the canoe pulled in to the shore. Ben climbed in and the gin followed. A man squatted at the stern by the tiller while a small boy crouched in the bows in front of the mast. The sail billowed out and they sailed upstream, into a widening valley with rice fields near the waters edge and scattered farmsteads shaded by clumps of bamboo and dark leafed mangos. The wooded hills on each side were full of clove trees and their scent sweated the morning air. A rudimentary bamboo bridge crossed the stream and here they had to lower the mast and raise it again. Water buffalo raised their horned heads to watch them as they passed. A canoe came

downstream laden with roof thatch. Beside the stream a group of women pounding a sago log waved. Ahead the valley closed in. Giant bamboo swayed overhead. They lowered the mast and paddled towards a muddy landing. Here the man watched them but did not follow as the girl helped Ben up the steep grassy bank. They crossed a bandy plank over a gully and came unexpectedly on an octagonally shaped hut. As Ben stood there he looked up the valley and saw for the first time the great cone of a volcano rising majestically above the forested foothills. A boy sat on a bench. There was something about his presence that impressed Ben. They sat on the grass in front of him. The boy reached forwards and put his hand on Bens head. There were no thoughts that passed but rather a dying away of thought and of the need for thought, as if the fires of endeavour, of need and want were being softly extinguished like candles, one by one, and in their place a sense of detachment, of release, of flying almost where thought

concluded and unsought took over. Now he knew he was in the presence of the mystery. He had brought to it his own small nothing, as should be, and in return he discovered abundance. The utter simplicity of this rather overwhelmed him. . The girl took Ben's hand in hers, and he sensed seeping into his soul like the soft sound of falling water a calm and belonging he had never before known.

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