

## Advance Praise for *The Breath of the Sun*

“Not since *The Left Hand of Darkness* has any book conveyed to me the profundity of the winter journey and the intensity of relationships forged in it. But where Le Guin was always evasive about religion in her sublime mountain landscapes, Fellman is direct about it. She creates an immanence in her mountain, *The Body of God*, that her characters respond to with an authentic and credible religious passion, one that gets mixed up with all other passions in their lives.

“The creed of Asam is elegantly crafted, beautifully quotable: *Your bodies are the compaction of stars and your minds are the compaction of history. Be decent to each other; pity each other, for it is not an easy state to be made of so much and live for so little a time.* The prose throughout is simple and luminous, with many sentences that hang in the mind: *Sometimes I think there is nothing sadder than a toy. They usually have faces, but they have no use.* Altogether a book that is about much more than ambition to scale a peak.”

Sarah Tolmie, author of *The Stone Boatmen* and *Two Travelers*

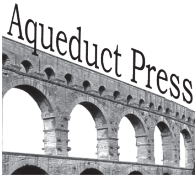


# The Breath of the Sun



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Isaac R. Fellman



Aqueduct Press  
PO Box 95787  
Seattle, WA 98145-2787

[www.aqueductpress.com](http://www.aqueductpress.com)

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First Edition, First Printing, August 2018

ISBN: 978-1-61976-138-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018939789

Cover illustration © 2018, Erika Steiskal  
<http://erikasteiskal.com/>

Book Design by Kathryn Wilham

Printed in the USA by Thomson Shore Inc.

*For my family.*





## Acknowledgments

I dedicated this book to my family, and by that I mean both biological and chosen. Aaron Fellman, my brother, was *The Breath of the Sun's* first editor. He is always there when I need help, and unstintingly generous with the gifts of his witty and balanced mind. Lydia Moed, my literary agent, was able to find this book's final shape and its ideal home at Aqueduct, while also giving life to her baby son. She has poured kindness and wisdom on me from the day that we met.

I don't know how to properly thank everyone who has given me help and care since I began this book, so I'll leave it here. Just know, all of you, that you are Fellmans now.



## Chapter 1

Asam came to the mountain grieving,  
and he left it joyfully.

—*The Gospel of the Worms*

O tile, my love,  
All metaphors are lying to you. The mountain is not *like* anything except itself. Even adjectives are suspect. *White* is safe. *Gray* is safe. *Treeless* is fine, though a little sketchy. And *large* has no use at all. Tell me, is the world *large*? I have looked down on it from God's own shoulder, and even I could not tell you.

It is much the same with Disaine. She came into my life suddenly, a whisk like a curtain, and I could never tell you if she was *brilliant* or *kind* or *afraid* or *fanatical* or *a complete damn-ass phony*. Those things, like the mountain being *large*, are the skin of a truth, but not the bones of it. I would like the two of us to stand over the truth and dissect it. You can be my teacher; I can be your guide. Come. Let us open the muscle of the neck.

Let us meet Disaine.



Back then I still ran the bar in my ex-husband's village, eight thousand feet up the mountain, just over the knob of its toe. I hadn't quite opened up yet, and I was crouched over the fireplace, banking the warm embers. Half an hour before that I had been on the mountain, and I still had the feeling of a night climb: hot muscle encased, smothered, by cold skin. I looked up when I

heard the creak of the door, which stuck a little in the new heat of the fire.

Her stick came into the bar before she did, but she was a fast walker and the tall staff of branched yew had barely thumped the ground before I was confronted with her stern face. It seemed carven of the same wood, peeled of its outer bark and laid out naked and austere.

“Lamat Paed?”

“Yes,” I said. I was used to being asked that, straight off, but not to knowing why. There were several potential reasons: I had climbed a good deal and written a book about climbing, and I was a guide as well. But she hadn’t said it like a fan, or a potential client, or even someone who’d vaguely heard of me and wondered if this building, unmarked like all the others, was the bar.

She said it like police. But when I said “yes,” she just said, “I am Mother Disaine,” and that seemed introduction enough for her.

I straightened up, still with the sense that this was a person of authority, although only a priest. I got a better look at her — she looked like a climber. Fried skin. A squint so fierce that the whole flesh of the face seemed thrust a little forward. She’d lost two fingers of her right hand — all that was left was the thumb, the middle, and the fourth finger, from which a holy order’s ring dangled a little, too big. Her robe was old, worn to real rags, and my first startled thought was that it must be the result of some oath, a vow to wear it until it fell from her. It was white and much patched at the shoulders with those bits of cloth the Arit Brotherhood (for that was her order) use to signal pilgrimages, conferences, papers published, and discoveries made.

“What would you like?”

“Hm?”

“What would you like to drink?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Whatever people drink in this place.”

I poured her a snowmelt vodka, the stuff I distilled for tourists, and I pushed it at her. “What brings you to town, Mother Disaine?”

“I’m looking for some real help.”

Instantly her eyes were wet. I tapped the bar and drew a little closer to her. The phrase had startled me.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, “I want to climb. *Really* climb, you understand?”

I said, “Most people just want a guide up to the monastery.”

“Oh, much higher than the monastery.” She took a pink gulp of her drink. “Lamat, I’ve come all this way just to meet *you*.”

“I’m honored.”

“*Twelve Miles Up the Mountain* moved me more than any book ever has, except for Mr. Trang, and you can hardly help that.” Slammed the glass down and smiled at me.

“What’s Mr. Trang?”

“*An Enthusiast’s Guide to the Balloon, Its Workings and Applications*. Usually the stuff that gets me the most involves diagrams. Stuff that most people would think was dry.”

“*Twelve Miles* feels dry to me.”

She gave me a level look. “You read it lately?”

“No. Hope never to read it again. It’s served its purpose.”

“Oh, I *like* you,” she said. And then, again, as if surprised: “I do!”



The fact is that *Twelve Miles* is untrue, although I wrote it for the same reason I’m writing this one: to puzzle out the truth. But the truth on a mountain is always unstable. The snow at its feet is only a thin layer over a crevasse. The thought is dried and pulled from its brain by desperate altitudes. All of its choices are bad, and its memory is porous and bloody. That was why I lacked the strength to go back to that book. I had just now, many thousands of days later, built a life of my own, and I had no wish to go back to the shaky little person I was then, with the truth of that disastrous expedition trembling on my lips like a nervous kiss.



“Then you’re a balloonist,” I said carefully.

She brushed down the pilgrimage patches that covered her shoulders. “These are balloon silk. From my pilgrimages to the air.”

“I just guessed that.”

“And that’s where I lost these,” she said, and held up her claw of a hand, flexing the remaining fingers. “The whole arm went black as candlewick. Both of them did, and I should’ve suffered no ill effect, but I had to wrap it tight in one of my lines to get safely down again. Deadman’s switch, you know? If I passed out I’d pull the cord. And by the time I woke up again the fingers were dead. *You* know what altitude does to people. It’s like fizzy wine.”

She was watching my face. I’ve lost so much of it to frostbite that most people are uncomfortable looking close, but Disaine was the other kind of person, the one who stares at the blasted surface as if it affords an easier path to the brain. It often strikes me as a cruelty in these people, jabbing through the gray earth where the dead are buried, but Disaine was too self-absorbed for that type of cruelty. Her face split into a smile again, bright and helpless.

“I thought you might think it was cheating,” she said.

“To use a balloon?”

“Yes. I’ve been twice as high as you—is that fair to say? Sixty thousand feet, to your thirty or thirty-five?”

“I won’t quibble.”

“And yet you worked for it, and I didn’t—well, not in the air. But really all I did was pull a cord and fly, and I went to the same place you half-died to get to.”

“It wasn’t cheating. You may as well say *I* cheated. I didn’t have to live with the fear of having nothing under me.”

“Oh, exactly!” she said.

I had neglected the opening of my bar. It was still late winter, and the sun had set early in the evening; I went to open the shades and add a log to the fire. Disaine watched me, sitting with her robe hitched up on one of my tall stools. She was tall herself, athletic, bent with age, but she knew how to use it—to make the stoop look only like an eager lean forward.

And she had a crown. Have you ever met anyone like that? I call it a crown, like in a fairy tale. A mark that shimmers in the cheek when they turn. The sense of a mass of hot light floating over their head. When Disaine smiled at you, it was like a smile in a book. A smile that means something, that has hundreds of pages of character behind it, that's the denouement of the whole action.

"Have you ever ballooned?" she asked me, blowing on her second vodka as if it were hot.

"No. I don't go south much."

"You mean down off the mountain? That's what you call it, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you go?"

"Nothing there for me."

"I suppose it's not much of an adventure."

"It's not my kind of adventure," I said. "My ex-husband lives down there. The one from the book."

"The one? Have there been others?"

"Fuck, no."

"And what is he doing now?"

"He's in *the business*." I waited for her to catch the euphemism, but she was not one to catch verbal nuance; she was not at home with words. In my experience, using a lot of them has nothing to do with whether you're comfortable with them or not.

"Well. Tell me more."

"There's nothing more to tell. I put it all in the book."

"Lamat." And I saw her breathe in, and it was as if by this breath, she pulled air from my own lungs, pulled it to her. She looked at me eye to eye, bloodshot and quick-moving. "You can't have put it *all* in the book."

"What do you mean?"

"You must still want to do it. To summit. And to meet God."

"My God is under my feet," I said, "and the last thing that God wants me to do is summit."

“I wonder,” she said lightly, and then the door blew open and my friend Dracani came in. I introduced him to Disaine, who raised her glass in salute and held his gaze for a long time. I’ll have more to say about him later, the bastard.



She stayed and drank until past ten. She kept throwing me nervous looks, but she didn’t approach me again except for refills. The villagers ignored her; by old etiquette they didn’t approach strangers unless approached first. They carried on the life of the village, gaming and chatting in low voices, clustered about the fires. And so Disaine was left alone, looking into her vodkas as if scrying them, and tapping her bundle-of-bones hand on the counter.

At the end of the night she asked me for a room. I showed her to my second-best one, hot from the big central chimney and acrid from the fur on the bed. She peeled back the corner of the bedspread. I put a flask of water on the night table.

“You should have everything you need. Light out by midnight. The oil costs.”

“I’ll be asleep long before then,” she said, and fell rather than sat on the bed, pawing at her shoes. “I keep climbers’ hours.”

“Do you climb?”

“Of course!”

“You didn’t tell me you did. Only that you want to.”

“I said I wanted to *really* climb,” she said, “and there’s a difference. I want to talk to you about it. Alone. I’m serious.”

“Well, nothing makes you look more serious than saying you’re serious.”

“I shouldn’t have got drunk,” she said savagely. “I was just trying to be *sociable*.”

“You don’t need to be sociable with me.”

“Yes,” she said, and looked up from the bed. “I knew I wouldn’t.”



Such force in the woman, even like this. A force that held up her body from within, that held it up fiercely like a prize. She said, “You know what’s special in your book?”

“What?”

“I can tell you’re dying to be back there. Every moment of it. Even as your friends fall. Even as your husband snaps you like kindling. In all this time, why haven’t you?”

“Well, I might be dying, but there’s no one to die for,” I said. Believe it or not, this is how I sound when I try to keep it light, but Disaine had no concept of that; her levity was always as heavy as gold.

She looked at me now, ran her tongue over her teeth, and said, “That could change.”

“Are you proposing yourself?”

“Of course not. I don’t mean for either of us to die.”

“Well, neither did my friends.”

“I’ve got some plans that would’ve saved your friends,” she said. “And I’ll show them to you, tomorrow, when I’m sober.”

“That’s a big claim.”

“I don’t fuck around about this sort of thing,” she said. “Will you be around in the morning?”

“I’m always around.”

“Let’s see if we can’t change that,” she said, and blew out the light.



That night I lay in my own bed and thought of nothing. Maybe I didn’t sleep at all; I often didn’t in those days. So long as you keep your eyes open, you can hold the room the way it is. If you focus on the glassy darkness, the lingering heat in the dead fireplace, the breadth (ten paces by ten) of the stone walls, the slit of the window—if you can take it all in at once, you can exclude the dead and the way they move in this room.



This will be a book for us and only us, Otile. I no longer want to tell a story to anyone but you. Your little hands know the weight of a human heart, a tiny red kidney, the weak tissue of a lung. Now I want them to know the weight of this. More and more I feel that I don't know it, though Disaine's story is *my* heart, *my* kidney, *my* lung. So you must weigh it for me.

Disaine made my life a lie. She made it not my own. And nothing I write can bring it back now. My last memoir taught me that. You can't bring back the past you long for, by telling it to as many people as possible — but you *might* crack a whip whose bit comes back and hits you in the eye.

So this is not a book. I wasn't joking before: it is a set of notes on an autopsy. And I need you to join me at the table, like the good doctor you are, and make notes in your small firm script. Can you do that for me?<sup>1</sup>



Morning came a few hours later. I was up for it, and swept the hard sharp night-snow from the steps of my bar. The light was pink and diffuse. I think of that place often, too often to describe it from life; besides, I am an adult, and I don't have to do things I've already done. For a full description of my little village, see *Twelve Miles Up the Mountain*.<sup>2</sup>

1 Yes.

2 LAMAT. I am sorry to intrude twice on my very first page, but I am an adult too and I hate looking things up in books you know I haven't read, and actually you asked me not to read.

OK, here is a full description of your little village:

*Snow and stone, stone and snow and a little water: I grew up in a place like this. The houses are low boxes, some with underground rooms bigger than themselves. Those rooms melt the snow above them, exposing ground that can be farmed a little in summer. Daila's family had a house, but they rarely used it; they preferred to live over the bar, where they could have the vantage of the whole town. I came here to marry him, sight unseen, though he courted me anyway — stood in the doorway smiling and handed me a wind-bitten iris and said he'd heard I could climb. He would never have heard such a thing. My mother had taken me out that*

“Lamat?”

It was Disaine. I smelled liquor on her still. It was disappointing that she hadn’t measured her drinking to match the altitude—I could always tell my visitors’ seriousness by this alcoholic barometer, and I found that I wanted Disaine to be serious.

But she was fully dressed, and the set of her head was erect and kind, like a bird’s. She came up behind me and said, “Beautiful morning.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to go up with me, in my balloon?”

“I can’t afford to lose any more body parts.”

“Looks to me like you only lost parts of parts,” she said lightly. “The tip of the nose, the gnawable parts of the cheek. But that’s involved with what I want to show you, and anyway we won’t go that high.”

“Won’t we be blown away from the mountain?”

“Yes. We’ll have to take the tram back up. My treat.”

“There’s still a fire in my bar.”

“Doesn’t anyone work for you?”

“No.”

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*summer, taught me the minimum a girl had to know. I had been married to Daila because nobody but my family could see that I was worthless, and so my dowry had been a bargain. But he was determined to make the best of it.*

*A town of a hundred people. The bar was the biggest building, a half-palace of sloping stone, where people came to drink and game and flirt with their real lovers, a place that hummed with light and energy. People could sleep there, when they could afford no fire, and Daila’s parents kindly ignored them. The guest rooms were for travelers only. Outside in the day, there was a tentative feeling to the place, a sense that although these houses had hard walls and ancient cellars, they really had no more root than a mushroom — one hard pop and they’d be out. The view had no detail to it, just green below and white above. Sometimes you could glimpse a hunter stalking far off, below where the leaves began, or a herder with her goats. Sometimes the tram would be starting up its thin line, a bead of wood. You could go up to the terminus and meet whatever traveler came out, and I often did, telling them in my good accent to come to the bar. It wasn’t such a bad life, until Courer stepped out of the tram and offered me a better one.*

“Can you put it out?”

I hesitated, then said, “Yes.”

I felt that I had to—however disturbed I was by the idea of all that space beneath me, and by the idea of the inn hot with ashes, unclean as morning skin. And however much I hated, ever, to put out the fire.



The balloon took some time to fill. It came in a massive crate on skis, which she had dragged from the tram by herself—a horizontal distance of half a mile, on a path that was far from horizontal. It was of an unfamiliar fabric, faded black and with a fuzz on it that caught unpleasantly at the hand. I was made to stand at the balloon’s mouth and hold it open, which gave Dracani time to wander over and stare at it with me. He had come out of his house without washing or waxing his silky mustache, and hairs kept flying into his mouth as he talked in the wind.

“Fuck me,” he said. “Are you really going up in that?”

“Can you take care of the bar if I’m not back for a while?”

He faltered a little, and then said, “Do you trust this woman?”

“You know me. I’ll do all sorts of things before trust comes into it.”

“Not lately,” he said. “But, sure, I can take the bar. I’ll give you whatever I make.”

“You don’t need to.”

“No, I do. May—may God spit you clear.”

“Yep.”

And he coughed himself back home.

Most of the villagers came out, though, over the next hour, to watch the balloon’s progress. None of us had ever seen one; they were still rare even in the cities, and at best we might have seen an engraving in a week-old paper. The thing still did not look much like a balloon by the time Disaine came back from inside the bar and took the reins from me. It lay limp on the ground, its surface crawling with each breeze.

“Ready to fire the burner?”

“*Are we?*”

“Step on up,” she said, holding up a hand gloved in a material so thin that I saw every detail of her fingers. It was a custom job, tailored to her ruined hand. I stepped into the basket, whose gate was left open for me, and Disaine followed and hit a switch on the burner. Instantly a jet of fire six feet high melted the snow around the balloon and made my face flush; the canopy inflated the rest of the way with a hard snap. The floor of the basket danced on the sudden mud beneath us, and strained at the guide-ropes that held it down.

She looked me up and down and pronounced my clothes—fur parka, fur trousers, and boots—to be warm enough, “so we can go any time.”

“All right.”

“You and you,” she said, and pointed out of the basket at the stronger members of the crowd, absentmindedly closing the gate as she did so. “Undo those ropes and hold us. You won’t be dragged up. All right. Ready?”

It was a strange feeling to be held to the earth by human hands—within the movements of the balloon, nervous in the wind, were the movements of muscles. I gripped the edge of the basket, which was chest-high on me and a little lower on Disaine. She held out her hand, palm up—a grand gesture, the fingers horizontal.

“Let go!” she thundered, and with her other hand threw out a sandbag that I had not realized she had been holding. A few more sandbags followed, amidst the general letting-go of the ropes, and we flew up so suddenly that when we slowed, I felt weightless. Disaine shut off the burner.

It was warmer than I had expected. The air was crisp and icy, breaktooth air, but the sun on our shoulders was hot, with no wind to cool it down—we moved with the wind, and so we felt none. Everything was neutral, flat. We flew over the side of the

mountain, at the level of the first milepost above the village, and below us ran the swollen veins of the ridges and rivers that made up its base. It's still an alien sight to me, all that liquid water.

The mountain looks the same at any distance between a yard and a hundred miles. It is not a mountain as other lands know them, but a wall that extends from horizon to horizon. Its mass grinds down the earth below it, and its peak disappears into the air with a surpassing lightness. It is snow-covered four hundred days out of the year, though there are windbent pines below the treeline and, above, the little swarms of life, the monastery and the observatory and my low village.

Disaine seemed entirely sober now. It was as if the burner had torched away the remaining alcohol on her breath. She stood now with one hand on the cord that opened the balloon's aperture, one on the handle that lit the fire. Her raw-looking skin was marvelously set off by the pinkness of the air, which was tinged with distant smoke.

"Well?" she asked me, the word a probe.

I said the word for indescribability that is also the name of the mountain. This word has served me well over the years, one of the few old Holoh words that has never been sucked into the language of the South; I translated it to her as best I could, in case she didn't understand my bit of local color. "Sublime."

"Precisely," she said with satisfaction. "I have always felt that sublime is the only word. In the sciences, to *sublimate* is to make a solid into a gas — isn't that a perfect metaphor for ballooning? Now, listen — here's my idea."

She knotted the line, let go of the burner, and reached into a neat little wickerwork locker at the bottom of the basket. Inside was an evil-looking snarl of rubber and glass that resolved itself into a mask, a plain insectile mask attached to a light canister.

"Bottled air," I said.

"You're clever."

"No, I know of it. You're not the first to have the idea."

“But I believe I’m the first to have *this* idea,” she said triumphantly, and withdrew more coils of material—this time a whole suit of rubber-coated cloth that fitted to the mask, and a helmet last of all, of thick clotted brown glass. It was handblown stuff, enormously heavy.

“All right. What does that do?”

“The thing people die of on the mountain isn’t the thin air,” she said. “It’s the loss of pressure. Our bodies are designed to be surrounded by a certain quantity of *stuff*. Too much or too little stuff, we die. But with the right pressure, we can go anywhere—even all the way up the mountain. This won’t heat you terribly well. You’ll need to wear furs inside and out. But you’ll live.”

I stood there, rolled my dry tongue around my dry mouth. She handed me the brown glass ball of the helmet, and I felt its inside, rough as old ice.

“All the way up the mountain,” I said. “To the top of God’s head.”

“Sure as shit,” she said.

I raised my eyes and looked at her. She was standing calm and steady, with her three-fingered hand around the balloon’s control line. Her eyes were a very clean blue. I was reminded of Courer with such force that it was as if I felt the wind after all. A solid punch of air right to the chest. It was the steadiness that did it. Courer had looked at me with that same steadiness when she had sat in the bar that evening, a little apart from the crowd as always, but with all the fire’s light on her face, and said quietly, “Let’s the four of us climb. Let’s see how far we can get.”

She shocked our faith. We weren’t rebels; we were three of the most orthodox young people you could imagine. There were rules for how you could climb without giving pain to God, and climbing loosely, freely, forever, was not against those rules but outside them. But the very transgression of what she’d said made it hard to answer, and that night after everyone else went home, and Saon and Daila and Courer and I went outside to have our last drink at midnight, we all looked to the top of the mountain.

There was a loud darkness, shifting into the sky with a blue that billowed, and we all felt the hum of it.

For a while, I thought it was the usual madness. Some people are driven like that; they make their excuses, faith or adventure or science, and then they climb without cease, till death, towards the mountain's magnetic north. But this was not madness. Every time I closed my eyes, I knew that I could have stopped us. But I didn't, and now Courer is dead.

Now Disaine said, "I knew I had to ask you. And only you. Not just because you hold the record. Because you've climbed higher than anyone except — maybe — Asam. But because you wrote about it, and showed me one way to pursue God, who flees me. And maybe has good reason to." She laughed a little, with unconvincing mischief. "I thought you were an atheist at first."

"Why?"

"Well, because Holoh aren't supposed to climb—"

"Without certain laws," I said. "Certain ceremonies. Some of us need to descend when others climb."

"And you seemed to break that law so easily."

"It wasn't that," I said, and looked over the basket at the side of the mountain, with its billion footholds in the snow. Snow on God's body, dry and fine. "It wasn't easy to break at all. But I thought — and I still think, even though it was such a disaster, even though people died and marriages ended..."

"Yes?"

"I grew up being told that God doesn't want us to climb. That we wound Them with our feet, that we blood Them with our fingernails. And that I'm not sure it's true. The Holoh are the only people who are visible to God. Why would They choose us, if not so that we could someday see Them face to face?"

It shocked me how clear and bold it felt to say it. I had thought it all for many years, but it was another matter to stand and let the words go. She looked at me with serious interest, letting the moment pass without further comment, and then she took up the



suit again. “I’ve tested it in balloons up to about sixty thousand feet. That’s as high as you can go in one.”

“That’s not an eighth of the way up the mountain.”

“Ah, but what *is* an eighth of the way.” She smiled, her eyes alight now in their narrow orbits. “The Holoh say the mountain is three-thirty [330,000] feet. Nobody knows where you got that. The followers of most of the saner gospels — the Waters, even the Worms — say it’s a hundred thousand, and the Arit Brotherhood thinks all sorts of things at once. They’re sure no mountain higher than fifty thousand feet could ever make sense, it would throw the planet’s orbit out of whack, and yet the mountain is so *patently* much higher than that. I’ve sat at sixty, where your fucking saliva boils out of your mouth, and it looks the same as it does from the ground. The Gospel of the Unseen people say it’s infinite height, but they don’t even acknowledge the existence of space. Me, I think the Holoh are much more right than anyone knows. Why are you smiling?”

“Priests are always telling me the Holoh are right about something.”

“Oh!” she said, and looked flustered. “I hadn’t known.”

“They think it helps.”

“You are a sharp one,” she said, as if to herself. “Well, that’s why balloons were a fool’s errand. Never get high enough to get a sense of the thing. But I assure you, even when you get to the saliva-boiling part, in one of *these* you don’t feel anything. You feel absolutely great. It’ll work.”

“Absolutely great,” I said absently, trying to remember the last time I’d felt that way, wondering if Disaine did it often. “So at thirty thousand you lost your fingers —”

“Thirty-six.”

“And then you made the suits.”

“After I learned to sew without my index, yes.”



She always said “thirty” for “thirty thousand feet” and “sixty” for “sixty thousand.” In my recounting of the story, I have had to add “feet” in order to make her meaning clear. She might as well have been citing ages, and indeed I came to recognize that the heights she’d reached were roughly commensurate with her age. She was a little over sixty years old; she had reached a height not much higher. Now she wanted to snap the rope that bound them.



All this while the balloon was flying swiftly away from the mountain, caught in the icy clean wind that streaks objects and birds away, that purifies the mountain in its own plume of snow. Disaine had brought us steadily lower, in order not to take me too far from home, and now we were only a few hundred feet above the fields outside Garnerberg, and slowing. The breathless ride was almost over, and I found that I was not ready to go back to the world of labor and weight.

“Even in your village, the pressure’s so low,” said Disaine, holding a rope tightly and scanning the ground. “You can put on a suit there and immediately feel better.”

“*You’d* feel better. I’d feel woozy.”

“Really? The full oxygen does that to you?”

“The excess of oxygen. The ground has too much. It gives you strange ideas.”

“People say the same about where you live. Maybe there’s no place on the planet that doesn’t. Maybe we all have strange ideas all the time, and we blame it on the weather.”

She pulled the cord. The balloon descended with a sharp jar, and suddenly the ground was swishing past us, the basket grazing the tips of the young plants, and I knew our speed. The landing was hard, a sharp jab up the spine, then another, and then we came to rest, though my mind and body were still all a-rush.

“You’ll be a little shaky on your pins,” she said, and opened the basket’s hatch, stepped out into the lush green, breathed deep

of the air she'd been breathing all along. "That's natural. Every time someone flies for the first time. Some get sick."

She had yanked off her gloves when we'd landed. Now she offered me her hand, and I took it, feeling bone and scar tissue. She escorted me off the balloon, and my feet sank into the soft, rich earth of the land around the mountain.

It was terrifying to see the mountain so close. I lived on it, of course — I lived *it*. But when I was down in the world, amidst the petals of the flower of which the mountain is the stamen, it was always terrifying for me to see it still as close and grand, as encroaching, as perfumed, as if it were next to you or beneath you.

"I've read your book," she said. "Will you read mine?"

"Your book?"

"My diaries."

She was looking at me so beseechingly. I realized that the speech had been prepared well in advance, and I told her, "All right."

The balloon's basket could be entirely opened on one side to form a sort of bench. We sat on this, on the basket's gritty floor, and she handed me two leatherbound books, not large, very old. I already understood that it was typical of Disaine to decide to write a diary, to purchase the materials as a girl, and to keep everything compact, precise, in these same two books for the rest of her life.



I never knew what to do with Disaine's diary. I read parts of it that day, yes; I learned a little about the monastery where she had been educated, and the ones where she had served, and her long years of wandering after. But I really learned nothing. Even when she was writing about herself, even when she opened her rawest heart, she still seemed to talk mostly about things and other people. There was a cleanliness and a smile to it that I didn't know how to break through, even if I rubbed it hard with a fingernail, even if I breathed on the page. I still have her diaries, I've read them through, but I don't see Disaine in them.



*Maybe it's just that I didn't know her, but I thought there was a lot to learn from Disaine's diaries. I've read them myself, now, except for the parts where the handwriting is too bad (not even right after she loses her fingers, either — it is barely worse in those months. Is it possible, Lamat, that she was ambidextrous? I have often found that ambidextrous people are skilled liars; I think there's a suppleness in the connections between the two halves of the brain that facilitates lying.)*

*Anyway, I think there are parts that are important to know. And don't we often describe ourselves when we talk about other people? That's a truism, isn't it? Here's the part you must have read that day. — O*

FROM THE JOURNALS [this was really what Disaine had written, here on the first page] OF ERATHE SIRAYAN.  
[Then this, in a different pen and an altered hand.] LATER CALLED MOTHER DISAINE.

It is very quiet in my cabin in the evening, and I have no friends here; therefore, I have begun this log of my days in order to provide myself something to do.

I arrived at the monastery of Saint-Cythians two weeks ago. It is an arid, dry place, not the high desert of my imagination but the scrubby desert, the harsh desert, plants that cling to your robe and the ground and each other. There are five cabins for initiates and only four initiates, but they clump us all into one, four little rooms with a bed each, and that much privacy provided only to keep us from temptation, I suppose. Certainly there's little enough among my fellow-travelers to tempt *me*. The rest of the time we are together, and the social muck of it all, having to talk until we all blur together, is wearing me down. I suppose that's

the point of it, to see if we have a secret heart, and then to quietly crush it. They want to make Nothing of us.

Tonight is my sixteenth birthday. At home you'd get a little maple candy on your birthday, or at least dispensation to talk about yourself a little. I don't mind putting aside what is childish, but it is surprising, and depressing, and maybe restful, to have it unacknowledged.

I am not popular among the other postulants. They were much better educated than I before we came, and so they are more patient about these first months of toil, in which we are expected only to work in the kitchens, and scrub corrosive chemicals, and polish steel and brass instruments, and pray — to do all the work that the real people of the monastery don't have time to do, including the shouldering of their burden of prayer. Their work may explore the motion of the world, but we must pray to keep it going round.

I cannot say that I am surprised. I've read enough to know that this is how learning starts, with irrelevancy, and boredom, and exhaustion. But at least at home I could maintain my Secret Heart as I liked, without having anyone push at it. It's hollow, of course. They always are; I don't know why anyone needs to test to find out. What matters is what manner of air fills that hollowness — whether it's buoyant, whether it's toxic, whether it's inclined to fly up or down. I am afraid of having my heart pressed out of me by all this work and boredom, and feeling all my delight in knowledge hiss out of the puncture.

The stars here in the desert seem to fizz and leak, they are so bright. Their colors are discernible here, which they were not at home, with the faint film of pollution that came out of the town. And the constellations are subtly different here in the south. I can see the Kite and the Man of Fire, but the Swans are all out of alignment. Curiously, I can still see the Sailor's Despair. I wonder whether this is because it is really a planet, and if so, why I no longer see the Maiden's

Hope. I have tried asking questions like this, but they don't act as if mine are very clever questions.

Second Fish Day, Demed, 986

In the physics laboratory there is a machine that breathes. That's all it does, and maybe "breathe" is a fanciful word: it's a tube of very clear glass, clearer than most air, with a bladder of pink rubber in it that rises and falls with the rhythm of breath. There is also an effort like breath. You can see it hesitate for the moment at the bottom of the tube, and somehow it seems to compress before it finds the strength to go on again.

I sat for a long time looking at the tube and the pink rubber thing in it. I thought that if I pressed it in my fist it would probably be so soft that it was unpleasant. The tube seemed to glow by itself. It was very hot, and I'm glad I only touched it with a mitt on. These are my observations.

The bench it's on isn't one that's normally used. I'm going to go there after morning prayers to have a look at who stands there now. I want to know how it does that, how it has the quirk of a person like the quirk of lips, how it moves against gravity. I swear I saw it speed up sometimes, as if in exertion. Then it was once again calm and slow.

Second Plant Day, Demed, 986

I found out what the rubber thing was.

I was going back to clean after morning prayers today, and then a priest came in, earlier than the others. I do not know this one yet; she is new to the monastery and her name is Mother Haelene. No pilgrimage patches except just one, red, on the shoulder, like an epaulette. She had a nice gentle face, square and pink, and I liked her right away. I said, "Excuse me, Mother, is this your machine?"

“It’s not really a machine.” She put on gloves and took it up, and it breathed all the while in its little glass case. “It’s made with magic. Just a toy.”

“Then what’s the fun of it?”

“Just to see what I can make. What I can do. Here,” she said, and hoisted it a little higher in her hands, and told me how she had made the bladder move, how she had inflated it with her own breath, how the air in the tube had been modified to drag it up and down, how even the little hungry movements that it made, like a body, had been consciously chosen. Then she carried the case to the big sink and, still gently smiling, hurled it down with great force. The sink was filled with shattered glass; the air was hot and sulfuric, and the little pink bladder flopped and twitched among the debris like a dying thing. I cried to see it there. The tears came too sudden to bite back, and I made to grab it, at least, out of the broken glass.

She seized my wrist and took up the bladder with her other hand, squeezing it until it popped. She was still looking at me calmly and steadily. She said, “Don’t mistake this for something alive, Erathe. I broke that to show you.”

I was still crying. I couldn’t help it, I was so far from home. She sighed and washed her hands at the sink, and brought me a clean dry towel and made me sit down. Then she knelt before me and took my hands, as if I were a child.

“Erathe,” she said again. “Don’t confuse magic with life. Or with your work, God forbid — it is not something that can be studied. It’s irrational, it’s light, it’s something to use for pleasure. It’s a way to cut out steps, but in the dance of science, the steps are the point. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“I know what you *mean*. I know all the methods.” And I quoted her, “*Inquiry, investigation, invariability.*” (But I should have said something about wanting to put in *inspiration.*)

“Look.” And she stood up, bracing herself on the edge of the worktable. “You may be only a child, Erathe, but you’re probably my senior in study. I’m one of the new women. The queen gave us permission to become priests retroactively, because it wasn’t allowed when we came of age. Before then I was a maid in the monastery of Lorian. The hours were long, the priests were unkind. I was a brilliant girl once, and I know that I don’t have that kind of power anymore, because it really is taken from you if enough people treat you like you have nothing to add. Do you know what it taught me, though? Besides patience?”

“Respect for the system,” I said numbly.

“Reverence,” she said. “Love, even. For science, for the scientific process. I’m not heartless. It bothered me to break that thing I made as much as it bothered you. But it was only magic. Magic is individual. We all come to it in different ways, and you need to find your own language for talking to it. But science speaks all languages, and once it’s done and done right, the advance you make is free, and it belongs to everyone. And to know more is to be more like God. We are enabling people — many of them not yet born — to advance, not only in our understanding of God’s world, but our understanding of God’s mind. All magic does is teach you what your own mind is like already. You don’t need to agree with all this, but I want you to think about it, and write it down, if you keep a diary. It’s something I wish I’d known when I was your age. Do you promise to think about it?”

“Yes,” I said, and I meant it. I know she was right, I know why I came here, but the bit of rubber made such an awful snapping sound, and I keep thinking of how it had moved among the broken glass. Haelene held me, and I cried myself out into her shoulder. I think she thought I was only homesick.