

The City that Walked Away

Andrew Ravensdale

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*Go, hunter, take with you Shamhat the harlot!
She should strip off her raiment to reveal her charms,
Enkidu will see her, and he will approach her,
His herd will spurn him, though he grew up among them.*

The Epic of Gilgamesh

*No bull mounted a cow, no donkey impregnated a jenny,
No young man impregnated a girl in the street....*

The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld

*Said I hear the words of the Iyaman say:
'Babylon, you throne gone down, gone down;
Babylon, you throne gone down.'*

Bob Marley

*The alternative assumption – of idleness in the face of disaster –
requires a leap of faith at which we may rightly hesitate.*

Joseph Tainter

1

The moon was behind the clouds. The houses round the square were black shapes in the darkness. In the middle of the square was the silhouette of a thin bony cat with its forepaw raised. The upright tail of the thin bony cat waved slowly. The upright tail of the thin bony cat was a fern in the undergrowth.

The night wind lifted the dust from the dry fields along the river. The dust from the dry fields settled finely on the stones of the square. The dust from the dry fields settled on the reeds of the rooftops. The dust from the dry fields settled on the ceramic acroterion at the end of the roof. The dust from the dry fields further obscured the image of the God on the acroterion. The image of the God on the acroterion was already masked by the darkness.

To the side of the square there was a black shape. The black shape was tall. The black shape was somewhat irregular. The black shape appeared to be a column of some kind.

From behind the black shape a noise was coming. The noise was unmistakably the sound of copulation. Judging by their voices, the copulators were young.

The boy grunted. The boy's grunts were regular. In close harmony - though not in unison - the girl gasped.

No-one was there to notice. The closed shutters of the houses round the square were invisible. The houses were black shapes. Behind the shutters of the houses nothing stirred. The square was empty.

There were many empty squares like this in the Old City in the years of its terminal decline.

The irregular black shape - the column of blackness - was tall. The irregular black shape was more than the height of a man. We could of course equally say - and this is I think by definition - that the irregular black shape was 'more than the height of a woman'.

The equivalence is not conceptually difficult. The equivalence could easily be inferred by an individual of fairly limited reasoning power. We don't in fact say 'more than the height of a woman'.

As an individual whose powers of reasoning are thought by some to be far from limited, I could speculate quite convincingly as to why we don't. But that would take us rather far from our theme. So I won't.

The grunts and groans rose predictably to a frantic crescendo.

I say 'crescendo', though it is not quite accurate, because on the whole I prefer to avoid the word 'climax'.

I think the word 'climax' is often over-used. I think also, and this is not unimportant, that the over-use frequently occurs in rather a vulgar context.

The grunts and groans subsided, as such things do. The grunts and groans were substituted by soft and intermittent moans.

The boy drew back his torso. The boy stood upright. The boy breathed heavily.

The girl gave one last gasp. The girl stretched. The girl raised both hands and pushed her hair back from her face. The boy still grasped her thighs.

The girl put both hands on the boy's shoulders and unclasped her ankles from behind his back. Then, slowly, her mouth open as if her hips were painful, the girl began to lower her legs.

In the distance the voices of the guards echoed faintly. The guards were changing the watch.

In the desert beyond the fields a dog faintly howled.

The boy waited. The girl's feet touched the ground. The boy stood back. The girl slipped her buttocks off the edge of the plinth. The girl had been rather precariously balanced.

The boy and the girl stepped away from each other and straightened their tunics. Underwear was apparently not in fashion at this precise historical moment or in that particular cultural epoch. Perhaps underwear was simply not available - as the small amenities of life so often are not - to members of the lower classes.

Far away a donkey brayed. Somewhere in the city revellers left a tavern. They were briefly loud.

The boy turned. The boy began to walk towards one of the exits from the square. The exit was a dark gap in the opacity around the young people. The girl followed.

From the fact that the young woman followed the young man and not the other way around the alert reader will be able to make a simple deduction. We are very familiar with gendered relations in modern society. I think we may infer that gendered relations have deep roots in the civilisation of the ancient world.

The thin cat turned its head towards the footsteps. The thin cat's paw was still raised and its tail was still waving. The thin cat stared.

There are difficulties of perception created among other factors by the surrounding darkness. It is tempting to say, nevertheless, that the cat's stare was cold.

In the shadows of the gateway stood another columnar shape. This columnar shape was quite short. The columnar shape appeared to have a head. The columnar shape did not appear to have arms. What the columnar shape could be very clearly seen to have, even in the darkness, was a disproportionately large, and unmistakably erect, stone penis.

These images were common in the Old City, particularly in the popular quarters. The origins of the images and any knowledge of their precise spiritual function had long been lost in the mists of time, or possibly slightly before that. In the popular quarters the images were affectionately known as 'Stones in the Passway'. Nobody knew what that meant.

There had of course been a great deal of academic speculation on the subject. As is the nature of such things, the academic speculation had eventually proved to be completely fruitless.

The young people slipped into the alley. Only the Gods knew where the young people were going. Even the Gods, despite their traditional claims to omniscience, may not have been quite sure about the exact destination of these particular young people at that precise time.

As they passed the Stone in the Passway, the girl – without turning her head or breaking her step – reached out her hand and wrapped her fingers neatly round the glans of the stone penis. The girl gave the stone penis a quick flick. The gesture implied a certain familiarity.

The cat turned. The cat set its paw deliberately to the ground. The cat slipped away. The cat's tail was upright like an ensign.

You would have sworn that as the young people disappeared you heard from somewhere deep in the shadows of the gateway a sound resembling nothing so much as an abrupt grunt. The grunt would have reminded you of an echo in a cave. You would not have believed yourself.

From up above the square came a different sound. This sound was more credible. This sound was more natural. This sound came from the direction of the irregular column of blackness.

It was the sort of sound you hear in the forest from time to time. The wind gets up. An old tree is about to fall. It groans.

Sensitive people are particularly likely to notice these sounds. When they hear them they think the trees are talking. They think the trees have a language.

I should perhaps acknowledge at this stage that I am myself a person of a rather sensitive disposition. In the past I have occasionally speculated, in quite a serious fashion, on the possibility of a language of trees. I have never reached a conclusion.

I wish to assure the reader that I shall endeavour to minimise the impact of this sensitivity – it being a trait that is by no means randomly distributed - on the narrative now ensuing.

The sound cleared its throat. The sound spoke.

‘Well, you would have fucking thought they could have fucking asked, wouldn’t you?’

The voice was deep, and masculine. The voice was rough. The speaker had suffered. The tone was plaintive.

‘I may have been marginalised within the pantheon by the course of intra-celestial events. My image may have been exiled to this badly-maintained quasi-suburban location as a consequence of temple intrigue.’

The speaker cleared his throat again. The speaker sounded on the verge of tears.

‘But I remain, however much my powers and faculties have been diminished by various factors – including, not least among them, traumatic head injuries - in a very real sense a divine entity. You would have thought those fornicating brats, despite their evident disinhibition, could have shown a bit of fucking respect.’

The voice choked with emotion. There was a complex creaking. The creaking might have made an observer think of a tall ship exercising a difficult manoeuvre in a high wind on the open sea.

There was of course no observer to draw the inference. If there had been an observer, it would have been clear to that person – always assuming that the observer was in fact a person - that the speaker was significantly stressed.

'I don't expect burnt fucking offerings. It's aeons since I've smelt a bit of smoke. Neither do I expect blood fucking sacrifice. I have attained a certain level of acquired wisdom through the eternities of suffering. I have learned to keep my expectations low.

'That notwithstanding, every day I am pissed on by dogs. I am shat upon by pigeons. I have ivy growing out of my left earhole. My backside is intermittently fucked up against by all the teenage tearaways of the *banlieu*. I am ignored by the respectable citizens who use this dilapidated square as a thoroughfare and a place of business. I am subjected to contemptuous glances and derisive comments by the idle and the witty. I am used to all that. I can handle it. But...'

The speaker was overcome by self-pity. From above the darkened square came the smothered sounds of sobs and sniffles. It was a display of the softer and weaker emotions that one does not habitually associate with the idea of a God.

The Wooden God mastered himself. The Wooden God continued. The rhythms of his speech were more insistent.

'But what about some minimal acknowledgement of the presence of the numinous? A raised hand? A momentarily elevated gaze? Or even a mumbled formula learned and half-remembered from that whoring slag who gave you your incontestably illegitimate and almost certainly unrecorded birth? I wouldn't mind. I really wouldn't fucking mind.'

The Wooden God paused again.

'After all,' the Wooden God said, 'it wouldn't take much energy. Not compared to shagging her fucking arse off like that.'

If there had been an observer he – or of course she – might have heard breathing in the stillness and the darkness. And the same hypothetical observer, however gendered, might have noticed that the breathing was becoming slower and deeper, and – if reasonably, though not by any means exceptionally, intelligent – might have proceeded from the observed facts to a speculative, if well-founded, inference about increasing calm and greater emotional self-mastery.

The clouds rolled away for a moment from the face of the moon. It was full. It had that luminosity that takes your breath away. At the top of the dark irregular column in the square something moved. The something was definitely headgear. It was perched on what was incontestably a head. It was not, as one might have expected, a priest's skullcap or a warrior's helmet. One's suspicions would have been, despite the anachronism, that the item of headgear in question was in fact a wide-brimmed hat.

However that may be, there could be no question that the God – literally as well as in the meaning of the more colloquial metaphor – was definitely looking up.

On the edge of a black roof a thin bony cat raised its head to match its erect tail.

The clouds rolled back. The moon disappeared. The God and the cat were back in the darkness.

The moon was laughing at them.

2

Fastidious Youth was sitting on the plinth. On the Western horizon the sun was sinking. The day was waning.

The cliffs across the river were already in deep shadow. The cliffs behind the town were brilliantly lit by the red sun. The reliefs of the younger Gods were picked out from the living rock as sharply as if they had just been chiselled. The shadows were black. The highlights were too bright to look at.

Fastidious Youth was reclining against the shins of the wooden sculpture. Fastidious Youth's posture, as his name perhaps suggests, was somewhat languorous. Fastidious Youth might have been waiting for someone, though I should say he did not appear to be anxious in any way or indeed even restless. It might also be that Fastidious Youth simply had a remarkable personal capacity for complete inaction.

The front of the house across the square was deep in shadow. The closed shutters of the front of the house were as opaque and forbidding as they had been at night. The wooden statue was brilliantly lit by the evening sun.

The statue had been carved from the whole trunk of a single tree. The trunk was slender. The statue was of a tall man – or, as perhaps I should say, it was of an anthropoid figure of above average height closely resembling in the externals at least a mature male member of the anatomically modern human species.

The man – if indeed that is what it was – was depicted by the sculptor wearing a belted robe. The carved folds of the robe hinted clearly at a muscular body underneath the rough material, suggesting that this was the work of an artist of

some skill and not of a mere village carpenter. The boots were battered. Either the statue was suffering from exposure and neglect or the sculptor was attempting - through the use of a realistic technique - to suggest that the person, individual, entity or character represented was much given to travelling in a mundane or terrestrial mode.

The traveller clasped a staff. Due to the exigencies of the material and the selected form the traveller was clasping his staff high up with his elbow bent and holding the staff against the right side of his body. The resultant static posture suggested an interval of reflection and repose. On the right shoulder of the statue a small thin bony cat with patchy fur was curled up asleep. The small thin bony cat looked, and probably was, perfectly happy.

The face of the statue was impressive: a straight, dominant nose, a strong masculine chin, a chiselled mouth, a full beard, the lips neither too thin nor too full. A particularly striking detail was that over the right eye - or, I hasten to add, over the socket where the right eye might reasonably be assumed to have been, at least originally - there was an eye-patch. A cursory visual inspection would suggest that at some stage the eye-patch had been stained, and that the stain had been black.

Most impressive of all, and I must say completely incongruous with the physical culture at that time prevailing in the region, was the headgear that shaded the masculine and - I would be on the whole inclined to say - the noble face of the statue. The headgear in question was a high-crowned broad-brimmed hat, worn with a somewhat rakish tilt over the right eye - or, as I should probably put it, over the eye-patch concealing either the right eye or indeed - and this is something we do

not yet know and may never learn – an empty socket where the right eye once had been. Traces of black stain were even clearer on the hat than they were on the eye-patch.

The most striking feature of the impressive headgear was a great gash – a rip, or tear – that ran the length of the crown from back to front. The gash was perfectly aligned with the eye-patch and the possibly putative right eye. What was most surprising about the great gash was that its edges were charred. The hat had not only been split open – it had been seared by fire. From the dimensions of the gash and its position it seemed unlikely that the skull had escaped the violence of the trauma.

The aesthetic qualities of the sculpted form, in themselves in my opinion quite considerable, were somewhat marred by the tendril of ivy hanging from the statue's left ear.

The statue stood seven feet or so above the plinth. The statue was life-size. Fastidious Youth was also tall. Recumbent, Fastidious Youth's head came nearly up to the statue's hip.

It was a peaceful scene.

A casual observer might have been forgiven for assuming initially that Fastidious Youth was part of a planned group composition, and for speculating about parables of youth and maturity. More disturbingly, the same observer might have thought that the statue's head was inclined a little forward, that the statue was looking down and that its expression – his expression? – was indulgent and benign.

What is a wooden statue doing having feelings, in particular feelings of a warmer and gentler kind? It is a phenomenon that exhibits a flagrant disregard for biological probability, and a scant respect for the fundamentals of the law of contradiction.

The reader may be inclined to feel that the writer of this text – we hardly feel it appropriate to use the term ‘author’ here – is a low, subversive person who completely lacks the correct attitude to the principles of bourgeois realism, and is indeed less than fully committed to the maintenance and furtherance of the norms of bourgeois society and culture. The reader will probably, and very rightly, be quite deeply disturbed.

3

Tell the king that his brother the Last King of the Old City greets him.

May the Sun my brother be well. May my brother's senior wife be very, very well. May his sons be well. May the great men who oppress his peasantry and reduce them to the condition of dependent share-croppers be well. May the barren slags who scheme in his harem be well. May the charioteers who defend his realm when they are not freelancing as private muscle be well. May his scribes, both cuneiform and hieroglyphic, his jewellers and his carpenters, his architects and his fresco painters be well. And may all the other pox-ridden parasites who have managed to attach themselves to the glorious Sun of my august brother's royal personage be very, very well.

My brother, send chariots. Do not send the poxy kind with the axle in the middle. They are not stable at speed. Send the new kind with the axle set well back which creates the stable fighting platform of which my eldest son and formerly my finest general took tactical advantage in a decisive way when he chased your lot off the field of battle last time our vast armies clashed. I say formerly my finest general, because subsequently he anticipated rather too obviously his, as he thought, inevitable succession, and has consequently been released from his royal and military duties in order to allow him to spend more time with his ancestors.

Send charioteers. Send seasoned horse-masters. Send archers. Men who can put twenty-four arrows through the target while the trace horse gallops. Send spearmen who can stand their ground. And if you like you can send some of those

culturally innovative La Tène swords with the leaf-shaped blades and the cross-guards. They're nasty, they are. They lop off complete limbs in one go.

I go pale just thinking about culturally innovative La Tène swords with the leaf-shaped blades and the cross-guards. I shake with excitement.

The Riders are outside the walls. They have come south from the sea. They have cut the roads. They have burned the temples. They have left my messengers impaled on trees by the side of the road.

My viceroys and mayors are weak. I shall punish them. First of course I shall have to find out where the Riders have buried their mutilated corpses and dig the corpses up again. But I shall not hesitate to make an example of my viceroys and mayors afterwards. And I will make an example of my captains of charioteers as well. My captains of charioteers are cowards and cuckolds. My captains of charioteers mutter in their messes that they are discouraged by the fate of my eldest son the late prince. I shall find ways of discouraging the cowards and cuckolds still further.

My brother, send gold. My coffers are nearly empty. The only present of bullion you ever sent me was at my accession. And that was poxy silver, and it was only ten poxy bars. How long do you think that lasted?

I have been obliged to increase the interest on my personal seed and fertiliser loans to the farming dogs from fifty per cent to seventy-five, and to be even more ruthless in repossession on default. By this means I have secured an even larger share of the productive capacity of my kingdom, as is perfectly right, but increasingly I lack the labour force to work it. The farming dogs have taken to

slipping off into the hills and the deserts where they live in tents and have become sheep-shagging dogs.

Now it's not that I mind a bit of sheep-shagging, you understand. I'm a broad-minded man. I was almost reduced to sheep-shagging once on campaign, when both my serving-boys died of the pox. It's just that while they're off in the hills shagging sheep my croplands lay fallow, my irrigation channels silt up and the salt water in the swamps encroaches on my fields. If it wasn't for their regrettably necessarily labour the dogs could wander wherever they fucking wanted and shag whatever they fucking liked. But I am obliged to oppress the dogs. And the dogs are starting to bark.

The lady Erzulie of the seven and seven thousand nights is my goddess. The lady Erzulie of the seven and seven thousand nights is your goddess. Let us both pray to the lady Erzulie that all may be well and all manner of things may be well, for a hundred years and ten thousand years.

May the august Sun my royal brother reply by the same messenger. If the messenger does not arrive it is probably because he has been murdered on the road. My august royal brother the Sun will therefore be obliged to send his own messenger with the reply. My august royal brother the Sun will I am sure not delay.

4

The wind from the steppe was gentle. The wind from the steppe was mild. The sun was warm. The heat of the day had passed.

Voices floated into the square. Mothers called their children to come for supper. Children laughed as they played in the streets. Workmen on the way home called out to their mates.

In the square nothing moved. In the shadows from the west the God on the acroterion looked as if he had his eyes closed. It was a moment of peace.

There were sometimes such moments of peace in the long slow dying of the Old City. The people learned to cherish them.

Shag 'em All arrived. Shag 'em All made a dramatic entrance. Shag 'em All liked dramatic entrances. In fact Shag 'em All liked drama in any form. In another age – three millennia later, let's say – Shag 'em All might have been tempted by a career on the public stage - or perhaps even on the silver screen.

Shag 'em All stood for a moment in the gateway. I am quite sure Shag 'em All knew how effectively she was framed by the pillars, how well her linen tunic contrasted with the gathering shadows of the early evening, and how mysterious the shadows made her look.

Don't ask me how I know. I just know.

Without looking Shag 'em All reached out one hand with the fingers outstretched towards the lithic erection of the Stone in the Passway. Shag 'em All grasped the shaft of the erect penis firmly in the middle and then in one practised

movement flicked her fingers to the top and off. The gesture was unmistakable. You would have sworn the little god gulped.

Shag 'em All took one long stride and froze, with her left foot forward. Shag 'em All thrust her left hand behind her with the fingers bent back and up. The bangles on Shag 'em All's wrist shivered and jangled. The bangles trembled as Shag 'em All held the pose. The bangles became still.

Shag 'em All swept her right hand up to her mouth. Shag 'em All held it there. Shag 'em All was holding a shallow roughly made ceramic bowl. Shag 'em All did not put it quite to her lips.

Shag 'em All was wearing a plain cotton tunic as most women did. Shag 'em All wore it, in my opinion – which is of course subjective, but which is in this case an opinion I am prepared to defend with considerable energy - with rather more style than most other women. The tunic reached to Shag 'em All's knees. The tunic left Shag 'em All's arms bare. Shag 'em All's black curls fell to her shoulders.

Shag 'em All had brass and copper bangles on both wrists. Shag 'em All clearly had many generous friends. Silver trinkets hung from black leather thongs round Shag 'em All's ankles.

Another black leather thong was tied round Shag 'em All's head. Above the thong Shag 'em All's hair was smooth like a skull-cap. Below the thong Shag 'em All's curls were luxuriantly unbound.

In the middle of Shag 'em All's forehead a silver amulet hung from the thong. The amulet showed a slim but rather well-developed young woman in the shape of a crescent moon. The little sculpture had bangles on her wrists, trinkets on her ankles

and an amulet of her personal deity in the middle of her forehead. The little sculpture was rather beautiful. Hanging in her bosom from a chain round her neck the little sculpture had an amulet of Erzulie.

Shag 'em All shivered. Shag 'em All shook her shoulders and her hips in a manner that I can only describe as voluptuous. Shag 'em All was clearly taking pleasure both in her personal sensations and the effect she was producing on others. If you asked me, Was Shag 'em All flaunting? I would have to concede, Yes she was. Just a little bit.

Shag 'em All flung out her right arm in a well-rehearsed gesture that I hardly need say was dramatic, and let go of the bowl. The bowl described a rather beautiful parabola and shattered on the ground. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, there was no splash.

The bowl had been empty. The bowl was dry. The bowl had merely been a prop.

Rather prudently in her chosen profession, Shag 'em All clearly made a practice of alcohol avoidance.

Shag 'em All took another step. Shag 'em All staggered. The staggering was deliberate. The staggering was pure ham.

Shag 'em All turned her head roguishly towards Fastidious Youth and the Wooden God where they stood and lay, respectively, on the statue's plinth.

Fastidious Youth raised himself on his elbow. Fastidious Youth came an inch or two away from the statue. Fastidious Youth lifted his head and levelled his gaze. Fastidious Youth looked directly at Shag 'em All.

An objective observer might have thought that the Wooden God was also looking at Shag 'em All. An objective observer might have thought that the Wooden God was nodding. If there had indeed been an objective observer there, he might have even surmised that the Wooden God's expression was benign. But there wasn't. So he - or, for that matter, she - didn't.

Shag 'em All strode across to the statue, and by implication towards Fastidious Youth. Shag 'em All really did have rather long legs and a gait I can only describe as athletic. I think I have to say - well, I don't really have to say anything if I don't want, but I'm going to anyway - that Shag 'em All was a very attractive, and in some ways a rather formidable, young woman.

Shag 'em All flung herself down on the plinth. Shag 'em All sat on Fastidious Youth's left. Shag 'em All made a thoroughly well-balanced addition to the group composition. You would have thought it had all been rehearsed.

Shag 'em All propped herself up on her left hand and flung back her head. In the process of flinging back her head, Shag 'em All - and I am sure this was not accidental - tossed her abundant curls, which, even at the end of a day of heat and dust, were still rather glossy. Shag 'em All draped her right arm elegantly across her thighs - and I am sure this was not inadvertent either - in the process drawing attention to her flat belly and her slim boyish hips.

Shag 'em All sighed.

'I'm shagged,' Shag 'em All said.

Fastidious Youth levered himself a couple of inches further away from the statue.

'Yes,' Fastidious Youth said.

Fastidious Youth's tone was calm and reflective.

Fastidious Youth nodded, several times.

Fastidious Youth spoke again.

'I should think you probably are.'

Shag 'em All sat up.

'You know,' Shag 'em All said, with a strong suggestion of sincerity in her tone and a hint of tears, 'I get really pissed off with you when you speak to me like that. It's so hurtful.'

The strand of ivy in the Wooden God's left ear rustled gently against his shoulder. An objective observer might have thought that the Wooden God was shaking his head. Had the objective observer had particularly acute hearing, he might have thought he detected a rather wooden sound, resembling nothing more than the furtive operations of an invisible blunt-billed woodpecker. The observer in question might have surmised that the Wooden God was clicking his tongue.

The thin scraggy cat lifted her head. The thin scraggy cat peered over the edge of the Wooden God's shoulder. The thin scraggy cat looked down. The thin scraggy cat rolled over on her side. The thin scraggy cat curled up. The thin scraggy cat started licking her private parts clean.

5

The sentry paced the walkway of the citadel wall. The sentry paced backwards and forwards.

The sentry started at one watch tower. The sentry paced towards the next tower. When the sentry reached the next tower he halted. The sentry turned about. The sentry paced off again.

Every so often the sentry stopped his pacing. The sentry took shelter in one of the watch towers. Each time the sentry took shelter he stayed in the watch tower for exactly the same length of time. The sentry must have been counting.

Wrist watches did not exist. Hour glasses had not been invented. Glass at that date was only widely available in the form of ornamental beads.

If my information is correct, even the clepsydra was in a very early stage of development.

Silent counting is, in fact, the only available inference that fits the observable facts.

The sentry stepped out from the watch tower again. The sentry paced back in the direction he had come from. The sentry raised his foot and kept his knee straight.

The sentry was wearing mountaineer's boots. It was a mountain kingdom. Mountaineers, and by extension their gear, were the epitome of manliness.

When the sentry raised his boot he stretched the pointed upturned toe right out. The pointed upturned toe wiggled. The wiggling was comical. You wouldn't of course have dared snigger – not in the presence of a mountaineer.

The sentry marched a measured twenty paces. Then the sentry halted. The sentry right faced.

The sentry stared out over the roofs of the Old City. The sentry stared across the dry and dusty alluvial fields of the valley bottom to the cliffs beyond the river.

The sentry was counting again.

The wind from the steppe slapped the skirt of the sentry's short tunic against his thighs. It is of course quite difficult to look manly when the wind is blowing up your skirt. Again I think that ribald comments would have represented a significant short term risk, and would have been best avoided.

History tends to show rather consistently that imperial armies who begin their expansion with their troops in tunics either put them in trousers sooner or later or finally succumb to rival trouser wearers themselves. There are probably important considerations of military morale, arising perhaps from fundamental principles of masculine self-esteem.

The curved earpieces of the sentry's helmet tinkled faintly. When the sentry finished counting he faced smartly front. The sentry marched off again.

The sentry carried his spear across his shoulder at the slope with his right arm extended. The sentry held his left arm at the 'present arms' across his chest. The sentry's fist was clasped round the shaft to steady it. The sentry's small round shield hung on his back.

When the sentry reached the far watchtower he halted with a raised knee and a stamp; then he about faced. The sentry grounded arms.

The sentry was at attention. The spear at the sentry's side was steady. The sentry's breathing was regular.

This was not a farmer with a spear. This was a trained man.

The distances between the other watchtowers around the circuit of the walls were not all the same. The sentries arrived and set off at different times. The sentries spent the prescribed length of time in the watch towers. The sentries marched off with the same precise step. The sentries paced at an identical speed.

The sentries ignored each other. The sentries executed a complicated minuet on the top of the walls. The sentries could have been blindfold.

The sentry halted on the return patrol. The sentry left faced. The sentry looked down into the courtyard of the temple. In the pale dawn a few small figures in tunics were wandering around the temple site. One of the small figures was making heavy weather of dragging a tarpaulin off a pile of sand. One of the other small figures was testing the lashings on a scaffold pole.

The sentry did not look impressed. All the years the sentry had been posted to the garrison the Little People had been working on the temple. The Little People never made much progress.

In the centre of the courtyard stood a statue of Enki with his leopard skin and his club. Enki looked neglected.

The sentry lifted his knuckles to his forehead. Barely perceptibly, the sentry inclined his head. The sentry's knee, almost invisibly, bent.

There was a clatter in the courtyard of the citadel. A horse whinnied. A man shouted. The sentry started. The sentry's eyes snapped front. The sentry stepped off.

The sentry's foot swung higher. The sentry's toe wiggled worse. The sentry's heel stamped down with a good solid thud on the dressed stone beneath his foot. The sentry was staring rigidly ahead. The sentry's neck was getting sore.

Down in the courtyard there was a laugh. A couple of different voices swapped lazy banter. Water splashed from a bucket into a trough.

The sentry stood with his back to the watch tower. The sentry let out a long audible breath. Then the sentry shouldered arms. The sentry marched off again.

The sentry glimpsed something out of the corner of his eye. The sentry probably only spotted it because he had stopped looking. Something caught the sentry's attention.

The sentry turned his head. Quite unconsciously the sentry's mouth opened. Instinctively the sentry grabbed his spear to steady it.

The sentry broke step. The sentry turned to face outward. The sentry took a pace towards the parapet. The sentry halted. The sentry grounded his spear. The sentry leaned on the parapet and peered out.

The road rose up the face of the cliff in a series of long grades that turned through zigzag bends until the road reached the guard post on the cliff edge. Then the road disappeared from sight.

The sentry knew the road as well as he knew the way from his father's hayloft to the ditch at the bottom of the yard where he would creep at night to take a piss so as not to wake his brothers and get a beating. On the road where there should have been nothing at this time of day, except maybe a hyena or a fox, there was something moving. The sentry sensed it as much as saw it.

The sentry could make out the shrine by the side of the road. The sentry recognised it by its shape. The sentry could visualise the little God who lived in the shrine. The sentry had marched past hundreds of times.

The sentry's head leaned further forward. The sentry was clutching his spear. The sentry screwed up his eyes. The sentry didn't blink. The sentry had done this before.

There it was again. Something moved.

The road at that point was concealed by rocks and by bushes. The sentry knew the road was there. The sentry had tramped it enough times.

Something stood up. The something staggered forward.

The something was unmistakably a man. The man was at the limit of his endurance.

The man fell. The sentry didn't breathe. The sentry waited.

The man rose again. The man was swaying. The man shuffled a couple of steps. The man fell again. The man struggled to his knees. The man collapsed.

The sentry knew that weariness. The sentry knew it in his bones. The sentry was watching a beaten man.

The beaten man was trying to crawl down the royal road to the guard post at the top of the cliff. The beaten man probably thought it was still manned.

The sentry turned. The sentry forgot all his pacing and stamping. The sentry stalked to the edge of the walkway.

'Sergeant!' the sentry yelled.

Two of the sentry's mates looked up. His mates were washing in the horse trough in the yard. His mates grinned. These were not the grins of camaraderie.

His mates were old soldiers. His mates knew what trouble looked like. His mates knew how to stay away.

'Sergeant!' the sentry yelled again.

The sentry was getting frantic.

A door banged. Big boots stamped on the flagstones. A big man stuck his thumbs in his belt and looked up.

'What the fuck is all this then? I hope you've got a good fucking excuse! I hope you're not dragging me out of my nice warm comfortable guardroom before breakfast just because you're feeling lonely and want a cuddle.'

'Sergeant,' said the sentry.

'Because if you are I am going to tell the corporals to flay all the fucking skin off your puny fucking pathetic little body. And then I will personally dock you a month's wages. In fact while we are on the subject don't you still owe me from that dice game two pay days ago in the wine bar down by the water gate....'

'Sergeant,' said the sentry. The sentry was thoroughly miserable.

'What?' said the sergeant.

'Up here, sarge,' said the sentry. The sentry jerked his head.

'Oh fuck,' said the sergeant. The sergeant doubled up the stone stairs in a clatter of boots and bits of gear. By the time the sergeant reached the walkway the sentry was standing waiting by the parapet.

'All right,' said the sergeant. 'Where is it?'

The sentry stretched out his arm and pointed. The sergeant came up to him and stood behind his shoulder. The sergeant bent his knees and looked along the sentry's arm. Leather creaked. The sentry felt the sergeant's breath on his neck above this tunic. It wasn't a good feeling.

'If you have been fucking...'

'Sergeant!' said the sentry.

Both men watched. The men's breathing harmonised. The men's breathing synchronised the way women's periods are said to do when they share accommodation. Neither of the men noticed they were breathing in such intimate harmony. Neither of the men would have appreciated the analogy.

The tiny distant figure rose. The tiny distant figure got to its feet. The tiny distant figure swayed. This time the tiny distant figure didn't fall. The tiny distant figure staggered. The tiny distant figure moved forward.

'Oh fuck!' said the sergeant. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.'

'He's lost his horse,' the sentry said.

The sentry sounded thoroughly miserable.

'I don't care about his fucking horse,' said the sergeant.

'What's he done with the rest of his fucking squadron? That's what I want to fucking know.'

The sentry didn't answer. The sentry had just as good an idea as the sergeant of what had happened to the rest of the squadron. The sentry was equally unlikely to express his opinion out loud.

The sergeant stood upright and stepped back.

'Did you report this incident to the officer of the watch immediately it came to your attention?'

The sentry snapped to attention. The sentry held his spear upright.

'Sergeant,' he said.

'Did you observe this incident immediately it came within the purview of your allocated sector of observation on your watch?'

'Sergeant,' said the sentry.

'And finally did you patrol your allocated sector continuously without unauthorised intermission at all times and remain unflaggingly alert?'

'Sergeant,' said the sentry. The sentry was beginning to sound tired.

'Oh fuck,' said the sergeant. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.'

The sergeant made a dash for the stairs. As the sergeant clattered down the first flight he yelled up.

'You keep your eye on that dodgy fucking little geezer the whole fucking time, you hear?'

The sentry didn't reply. The sentry wasn't really expected to.

'If you lose sight of him for one fucking minute I will have you impaled and then crucified,' the sergeant shouted.

The sentry folded both his hands around his spear and leaned on it. The sentry hunched his shoulders up. The sentry seemed to think he was on outpost somewhere, and not on the battlements of the royal palace.

The sergeant's voice drifted up from the courtyard.

‘And when they cut you down I will see to it personally that you have to run the gauntlet of the whole fucking unit.’

At the parapet the sentry was completely still. The sentry stared out.

In the guardhouse men’s voices shouted orders and curses, booted feet ran up and down, horses whinnied, axles creaked. The stable gates swung open and the chariots rolled out. The drivers whipped up the teams.

Good Looks the Playboy was leaning forward over the rail with the reins clasped in his fists. He was concentrating theatrically. Good Looks the Playboy’s brow was furrowed and his lips were pursed in a pout.

The archers and the spearmen bounced around in the back of the chariots. The guard ran for the gates.

The chariots tore through the lanes towards the river gate. The sentry could hear the wheels on the paved streets. The sentry could hear the hooves. The sentry knew the sound so well he almost imagined he could hear the axles creak.

There were few people stirring at that hour. The people cursed the drivers roundly. They accused the drivers, on the whole quite accurately, of a reckless disregard for the rule of the road.

The sentry searched the cliff top for his man. The sentry found him sitting by the roadside. The beaten man was leaning back against the spiked stump of a lightning-blasted tree.

The beaten man was a prisoner. The beaten man was dying.

The sentry heard his relief slowly climbing the stone steps. The sentry turned. The sentry looked out over the top of the opposite wall of the citadel. The sentry

looked across the dusty fields at the opposite cliff. The sentry stared at the enormous reliefs of the younger Gods that were carved in the living rock.

The sentry stared as he always did at the fissure that ran the height of the rock through the middle of the group. The sentry began to lift his hand. And then the sentry dropped it.

What had any of that lot ever done for him?

6

In the night the Old City was as still as cities can ever be. There were few sounds.

The nailed sandals of the Night Watch - their number and their effectiveness having been severely reduced by efficiency measures - sounded faint, and almost otherworldly.

On the walls the sentries called the hours. Drunks staggered down the middle of the street bawling repetitive fragments of sentimental ballads. Tools clinked as burglars dug their way through the mud brick walls of houses. The younger sons of the Elder Brothers brayed and bawled as they returned from a night of self-indulgent anti-social revelry.

In other words, it was just another averagely peaceful night in a fairly typical, though admittedly slowly decaying, Ancient Mesopotamian urban conglomeration.

Outside the Old City there were more sounds, if your ears were sharp enough to detect them. The night birds called. The dogs whimpered in the fields as they tracked small mammals. Other dogs howled at the margins of the desert. In the hills hyenas barked. In the distance, in the forest on the lower slopes of the mountains, a solitary lion roared.

In the suburbs of the City a robber clicked his tongue as he held out a lump of poisoned meat to a slavering dog. Above the road beyond the City there was the soft clink of spades and the muffled thud of hatchets, as highwaymen worked quietly by moonlight to prepare the hides they were going to use to ambush the first mule train of the day.

A particularly alert sentry on the eastern walls of the City, or a cautious bandit hiding in the fields between the City and the cliffs, might have heard a different sound. The sentry might have stealthily interrupted his measured pacing. The bandit would have frozen.

The bandit and the sentry would both have stilled their breathing to catch any hint of repetition. When the susurrations came again the bandit and the sentry would have turned quite independently to face the Eastern cliffs beyond the limits of the Old City. The bandit and the sentry might have thought they caught a word, or words. Neither the bandit nor the sentry could have been sure.

The bandit and the sentry would have been looking towards the statues of the Gods. The sentry would have clasped his amulet. He might have muttered a prayer. The robber would have briefly thought - as he did under the pressure of any feeling whatsoever - of dying without a family around him and being buried, if indeed he was buried at all, without the appropriate rituals.

The cliffs were high. From a distance the Old City seemed to nestle at their feet. At night the Old City vanished in their shadow. The sentry and the bandit knew where the cliffs were, even though they couldn't see them in the darkness. The bandit and the sentry knew how the vastness of the cliffs over-topped the Old City. The cliffs were just too far away for enemies to set up catapults.

The only discrete entities who were near the cliffs at night were the Gods. The Gods, of course, were stone. The bandit and the sentry were independently both quite reluctant to assume it was the Gods who were doing the talking in the stillness

of the night. The bandit and the sentry were both almost equally reluctant to rule that possibility out.

No-one knew who had carved the statues. The Elder Brothers claimed that they had. The Free Citizens treated that claim with the same contempt which they reserved for most of the claims the Elder Brothers made about their history and their culture. The Free Citizens did not even believe that the Elder Brothers had built the citadel, though they conceded that they might have been responsible for the circuit walls of the Old City, and even the wharfs at the riverside. The engineering, in both those latter cases, was less impressive.

If the Little People knew who had made the Gods, they were not telling. Even the Elder Brothers did not claim they knew why the makers had decided to create precisely four Gods, or why they had chosen those four in particular. If you asked the Elder Brothers why one God had been left unfinished, they just threw up their hands.

The Gods did not concern themselves with such mundane matters. To the Gods it was sufficient to be.

One of the Gods spoke. The God who spoke was Erzulie.

'I am restless,' whispered Erzulie in the darkness.

Erzulie's voice was cold and hard. There was no echo.

'The comforts of sleep elude me,' Erzulie said.

Erzulie was the second divine being from the south.

'As a goddess, ma'am....' Baron Vendredi murmured. Baron Vendredi's syllables ground against the rock of the cliff.

Baron Vendredi was next to Erzulie. Baron Vendredi was the southernmost God. No-one knew why the ancient vanished sculptors had decided on that particular arrangement, or that precise sequence.

'As a goddess!' hissed Erzulie.

Erzulie's words were delicately chiselled.

The angry tone disturbed a sleeping vulture roosting on the cliff above Erzulie's head. The vulture took its head out from underneath its wing.

The vulture squawked. The vulture looked around. The vulture detected nothing of interest. The vulture put its head back.

'The days of power and glory are long gone,' muttered Erzulie.

The muffled vowels resonated deep in the cliffs behind her.

Erzulie rolled her hips. Erzulie was uncomfortable. Erzulie wriggled her shoulders.

The living rock creaked. Deep within the cliff tectonic forces were at play.

'We shall take back the power,' grated Ogbun.

The cliff rumbled.

'Power is ours,' announced Ogbun.

Ogbun stood on the right of Erzulie, to the north. Ogbun was inclined to claim this gave him a special relationship with Erzulie. Erzulie was inclined to get exasperated.

'Oh!' gasped Erzulie.

Erzulie sounded snappish.

The unfinished God was on the northern end of the line. The devout and the pious sometimes proposed that the sculpting of the unfinished God should be continued and brought to a conclusion. Where their proposal fell down was that nobody knew who the unfinished God was supposed to be or how he was meant to look.

The heterodox would even suggest, though no doubt out of sheer contentiousness, that the unfinished God was not meant to be completed. The heterodox claimed the unfinished God was the God of Uncertain Outcomes, or even of Failed Attempts, and should be worshipped accordingly - even if that meant not worshipping him at all.

The unfinished God struggled. In the darkness the struggles of the unfinished God were invisible. If they could have seen him the anthropomorphically inclined might have said the unfinished God was trying to free himself. If that is so, the unfinished God conspicuously failed.

'Ugh,' said Ug.

We may quite reasonably assume that Ug was experiencing a certain frustration, and expressing it as well as his limited - admittedly very limited - powers of articulate speech allowed.

The dog in the suburbs snapped up the poisoned meat. The dog drooled. The robber smiled. The robber caressed the dog's head.

The sentry on the walls resumed his pacing.

7

The Last King of the Old City lounged on his throne. The Last King of the Old City was good at lounging. Most days the Last King of the Old City didn't have a great deal else to do.

The Last King of the Old City was lounging on the throne in the Hall of Recitals. The Hall of Recitals was not nearly as impressive as its name. The throne in the Hall of Recitals was not impressive either.

The Hall of Recitals was a small room with thick walls near the defensive outer wall of the palace. There were two high windows and a narrow door. The Hall of Recitals was badly lit. It was hard to get in and out.

Originally the Hall of Recitals had been the venue where the poets recited their epics to the Master of the Lesser Horse-trough while accompanying themselves on a one-string fiddle prior to the epics being approved, or otherwise, for public performance at royal banquets. Hence the name.

Most of the epics were approved. Those appointed to the position of Master of the Lesser Horse-trough were not demanding critics. Many of the epics were shortened before approval, at the specific request of those appointed to the position of Master of the Lesser Horse-trough. Like *l'homme moyen sensuel* everywhere, those appointed to the position of Master of the Lesser Horse-trough were not usually aesthetically inclined. Those appointed to the position of Master of the Lesser Horse-trough had a limited tolerance for the inharmonious scrapings of the poet's single string. There were rumours that some of the poets reciting their epics to the Master of the Lesser Horse-trough while accompanying themselves on a one-string fiddle

were so bad that they were dragged up to the top of the cliff on the other side of the valley and thrown off, with their fiddles.

Probably the only members of the palace staff who now remembered the reason why the Hall of Recitals had acquired its name were the superannuated and the demented. In the case of the demented they had of course a varying degree of difficulty in relating what they knew.

By the era at which the current narrative takes place the tradition had fallen into disuse. Even the offer of a royal subsidy to allow the poets to add a second string to their appalling fiddles had apparently failed to preserve it. The name of the Hall of Recitals had however been retained. It had not occurred to anyone to change the name. That was rather the way of doing things, in the last days of the Old City.

The throne in the Hall of Recitals was an oversized wooden armchair with a hard seat and a high flat back held between two uprights. The back of the throne in the Hall of Recitals went up to a point. The uprights rose grandly and uselessly above the back panel. The panel may once have been carved. If the panel had ever been carved, the carvings had worn away.

In most cultures and at most historical epochs this would not have rated as a throne. Probably the only reason the Master of the Appanage got away with it was that chairs of any kind were very rare in the Old City. Most people made do with stools, and – as they said – in the palace you were lucky if your stool had three legs.

A fat, bald God sat in one corner of the Hall of Recitals with his belly bare. Propped against one wall was a stone panel with a Marching God in low relief. At the top left of the panel the tip of a curved sword identical to the one the Marching

God was holding over his shoulder was visible. In the bottom right of the panel there was the intrusive pointed toe of a mountaineer's boot. It seemed that the Marching God had once been part of an entire file of more or less identical other marching Gods.

The panel had been left there pending a decision as to its eventual fate. The decision had never been made.

The Last King was there in his particular role as the Fount of All Justice and the Source of All Mercy. Protocol stipulated that the proceedings should have been held in the Grand Audience Chamber of the West Wing. However the roof of the Grand Audience Chamber of the West Wing had collapsed several reigns ago – no one was quite sure when – and the great echoing space had become a haunt of bats by night and a resort of pigeons by day.

The Hall of Recitals had been pressed into service partly because it was a long way from the residential quarters. The screams rarely carried that far.

The horseman was kneeling on the floor in front of the king. The horseman's hands were bound behind him with leather. The horseman's spine was curved. The horseman kept his head down.

The horseman's face – not, given his posture, that anyone in the Hall of Recitals could see his face clearly – had that lack of expression that says a great deal. The horseman was a beaten man.

The king was flanked by two of his guards. The guards' cloaks were flung back to leave their shoulders free. The guards held their lances with the butts grounded. The guards' short swords hung at their hips on baldrics. Like the

horseman the guards were expressionless. Unlike the horseman the guards were not beaten. The guards were bored. Boredom was an inevitable part of the lifestyle the guards had chosen.

The torturers stood one on either side of the horsemen. The torturers' muscular hypertrophy made them look more like wrestlers or butchers than military men. The torturers' arms were folded across their over-developed chests. On their wrists the torturers had leather bracers with buckles and brass studs.

The torturers stood a little back. The torturers' posture seemed to say they were leaving the horseman to the king.

The Master of the Greater Close Stool stood behind the torturers. The Master of the Greater Close Stool's hands were folded in front of him. The Master of the Greater Close Stool's face was turned towards the king. Deferentially, the Master of the Greater Close Stool did not meet his royal master's eye.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard stood beside the narrow door. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard's arms were folded. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard stared at the opposite wall. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard was completely still. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard showed no interest in the proceedings.

The king brushed the air with one hand.

'You are lying,' the king said.

The horseman's head sunk lower. The horseman's spine curved further. No-one else in the room made a move.

'The fortresses on the frontier are strong,' said the king.

Briefly and almost imperceptibly, the nostrils of the Lord of the Upper Vineyard dilated.

'My garrisons are powerful. Their armouries are full. Their commanders are gallant. Their patrols are vigilant. How can this account of yours be true?'

The king paused. The king looked down at the horseman on the floor. It was as if the king was waiting for the horseman to speak. No-one else in the room believed for a moment that the horseman would have the temerity to do any such thing.

The king turned to the Lord of the Upper Vineyard.

'Have patrols sent north,' the king said.

'Ensure that the Riders remain beyond the frontier. Ensure they are in terror of my name.'

Just perceptibly, the Lord of the Upper Vineyard nodded.

The king turned back to the kneeling horseman.

'You abandoned your post,' the king said.

'You fled.'

The horseman's spine straightened. The horseman lifted his head. The right arm of the torturer to the horseman's left whipped round. The forearm slammed against the side of the horseman's head. The torturer did not move any other muscle.

The blow knocked the horseman sideways. The horseman almost fell. The horseman knelt with his torso leaning at an angle. The horseman made no sound.

The gaze of the torturer who had hit him did not move. The other torturer's eyes did not shift.

The king waited. The chest of the Master of the Greater Close Stool moved in and out as he breathed. The Master of the Greater Close Stool was breathing slowly. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard stared straight ahead.

Slowly the horseman's torso returned to the vertical. The horseman's mouth was twisted up. The horseman was in pain. The horseman took a couple of deep breaths. The horseman calmed himself.

'You abandoned your comrades,' the king said.

The king's eyebrows went up.

'You abandoned your command. You lied to save yourself.'

The king paused. The king thought. The king continued.

'You are lying about the force you commanded,' the king said.

'It is not possible that a squadron was wiped out so deep in my ancestral territory and so far from the frontier.'

The horseman sunk even lower. The horseman's posture looked thoroughly miserable. That is probably because he was miserable.

'We shall discover what happened to your squadron,' the king said.

'We shall find out what you did with them.'

The king looked at The Master of the Greater Close Stool.

'Have informers placed in the wine-shops at the waterside,' the king said.

'Have them report any disaffection among the soldiery.'

The Master of the Greater Close Stool bowed.

The king looked directly at the torturer on the horseman's left – the torturer who had struck him.

'Take him,' the king said.

The king flipped his other hand.

The horseman gasped. One of the torturers grabbed the horseman's upper arm. The other torturer smacked the side of the horseman's head with the back of his hand.

The guards gripped their grounded spears. The Master of the Greater Close Stool stared at a point on the wall above the throne.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard turned his head. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard stared at the torturers and their prisoner. It was as if the Lord of the Upper Vineyard was trying to retain the image in his mind.

You would have sworn that the Marching God on the panel from the relief that was leaning against the wall was also trying to turn his head and look. You would have told yourself that you were imagining things.

8

Shag 'em All spoke again. She looked rather hurt.

'You know,' Shag 'em All said, 'at my end of the market vanilla sex is rarely the first thing, or even the main thing, on the client's mind.'

Shag 'em All stared directly at Fastidious Youth.

'I do work rather at the high end,' Shag 'em All added.

Shag 'em All sounded rather plaintive.

Fastidious Youth nodded. Fastidious Youth was listening very carefully.

Fastidious Youth also looked hurt. Fastidious Youth was clearly a very empathetic young man.

'I use the word "client" advisedly,' Shag 'em All asserted.

Fastidious Youth nodded even more furiously.

'To say something banal like "*customer*" would not even begin to capture the dynamic of the relationship that I create.'

Shag 'em All pronounced the word she despised with heavy emphasis and open contempt.

'It's not even just about money,' Shag 'em All explained.

'I know I need to make a living. I could make a living in many other ways. What I do is something I chose freely. There was no mercenary pressure. I can say, without any affectation at all, that the work I pursue is a calling. A vocation. Through my inspiration and my dedication I raise it to the status of a form of art.'

Shag 'em All turned her head. Shag 'em All looked directly at Fastidious Youth.

'Performance art,' Shag 'em All added, just in case her point had not been clear enough.

Fastidious Youth turned his head as well. Fastidious Youth looked at Shag 'em All. For a moment Shag 'em All was silent.

The young people looked deeply into each other's eyes. It would have been an opportunity for a more romantic novelist than myself to develop a completely new plot line.

Shag 'em All resumed.

'I take people to places they have never been,' Shag 'em All said.

Shag 'em All's sentences were rhythmic. Shag 'em All's tone was lyrical.

'I make their furtive fantasies real. I help them realise aspects of identity that have been hidden in the darkness and the depths of the unknown self. It's all about the imagination.'

Shag 'em All was beginning to sound slightly hysterical. Shag 'em All paused. Shag 'em All breathed deeply a couple of times.

Shag 'em All spoke again.

'Penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse is something that my clients very rarely in fact demand.'

Fastidious Youth looked away. Fastidious Youth was nodding again.

Fastidious Youth's face was turned towards the butts of the reeds in the thatch of the house in the shadows of the evening sun across the square. It was most unlikely that Fastidious Youth's consciousness was registering anything that was present to his gaze. Fastidious Youth had turned too deeply inward.

Fastidious Youth turned back to Shag 'em All. Fastidious Youth looked at Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All turned her body towards him. With one swift motion Shag 'em All raised her knees. Shag 'em All kept her knees together under her tunic.

Shag 'em All stretched out her arms in front of her. Shag 'em All turned her hands back. Shag 'em All interlinked her fingers. Shag 'em All rested her interlinked hands on her raised knees.

Shag 'em All gave a little shrug. Shag 'em All lifted her chin.

Fastidious Youth gulped.

'When you....' Fastidious Youth managed to say.

'Yes,' said Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All sounded deeply caring.

'When they....'

'Yes,' said Shag 'em All.

'What do you...?'

'I, um....'

'You, er....'

'Yes,' said Shag 'em All. 'I, er....'

'Oh,' said Fastidious Youth.

The young people both fell silent.

Fastidious Youth raised his knees. Fastidious Youth leaned forward.

Fastidious Youth rested on his knees with his arms folded. Fastidious Youth stared down at the bare earth of the square.

Shag 'em All shuffled her bottom round. Shag 'em All was sitting close to Fastidious Youth and looking out the same way. Shag 'em All and Fastidious Youth were mirroring each other's posture.

Several feet above them there was an unexpected noise. The noise was very like a cough. What prevented one from being quite confident that the noise was in fact a cough was a hollow quality the noise had, and a certain dull resonance – a sort of muffled boom.

Fastidious Youth turned his torso. Fastidious Youth turned to the left. Fastidious Youth was thus facing more directly towards Shag 'em All. Shag 'em All turned to her right. Their postures were complementary. The effect was thoroughly charming.

Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All twisted their necks. Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All looked up.

The Wooden God was looking down. The Wooden God was beaming.

'I was just wondering,' said the Wooden God.

'I just wanted to ask.'

The young people stared at the Wooden God.

'Do you work from premises?' the Wooden God asked.

'Or do you do outcalls?'

The young people went on staring.

The cat stopped licking. The cat lifted her head. The cat twisted round. The cat stared at the Wooden God. The cat stretched out her paw, rather slowly and luxuriously. The cat put out her claws.

The cat swiped the Wooden God on the cheek.

The Wooden God took no notice. The Wooden God went on beaming. The Wooden God looked completely idiotic.

9

The Arch Priestess walked out from her private quarters into the morning sun. The Arch Priestess walked across the open platform to the top of the ceremonial stairway.

The Arch Priestess's appearance was informal. Only one attendant accompanied her to the edge of the platform.

The Arch Priestess was remarkably simply dressed. It can hardly have taken the slaves of the Arch Priestess's body much more than an hour to prepare her that morning. The Arch Priestess's gown was ankle length and flimsy, but the material was a demure black. There was a definite hint of a modest underskirt beneath the delicate muslin.

The Arch Priestess's long dark curls hung over her back, caught only in a finely-wrought chain of simple silver filigree. The Arch Priestess's sandals were trimmed with silver, rather than gold.

The Arch Priestess was wearing remarkably little in the way of bangles, bracelets, necklaces, pendants and rings. The number and size of the precious stones in the few pieces the Arch Priestess had chosen were, on this day, quite remarkable in their moderation and restraint.

The Arch Priestess looked towards the huge statue of Enki with his panther skin and nailed club that dominated the inner courtyard of the temple where the Arch Priestess had served the God since her early teens. The Arch Priestess allowed foreign visitors to imagine she had never served the God in any but her current elevated role. The people knew better.

The Little People in the warehouses and the weaving sheds would sometimes say that Enki looked like nothing so much as a money-lender's enforcer. The Little People were often rather bitter.

Many of the Little People had not become dependents of the temple until the merchants had foreclosed on the loans the Little People had taken out to pay the taxes on the yield of their farms. The Little People were however very careful to say nothing about Enki in the hearing of the Arch Priestess or her acolytes.

The Arch Priestess raised both hands in front of her with the palms down and the fingertips pointing in the direction of the statue of the God. The Arch Priestess's hands were perhaps a thumb's length apart. The Arch Priestess bowed. The Arch Priestess bowed until her forehead almost touched the back of her hands. The Arch Priestess held the pose for a moment. The servant of the Arch Priestess's body bobbed.

The Arch Priestess straightened up. The Arch Priestess looked satisfied. The Arch Priestess's gifts to the God were lavish. Every moment of The Arch Priestess's day from the moment she woke was her service to the God.

The Arch Priestess looked around the courtyard. The Arch Priestess's eyes were bright. The Arch Priestess smiled.

A couple of male dependents lounged in the doorway of the warehouse. One of the male dependents was elderly. The elderly male dependent squatted against the jamb of the door. The elderly male dependent wrapped his arms around his torso. Like that the elderly male dependent could stop his hands trembling. The elderly male dependent's head nodded uncontrollably.

The elderly male dependent's companion lounged against the wall. The elderly male dependent's companion's posture was misaligned. When the elderly male dependent's companion moved you would have been able to see that one leg was shorter than the other.

The elderly male dependent's companion did not move. The elderly male dependent's companion remained still.

A female dependent sat in the doorway of the weaving sheds. The female dependent was heavily pregnant. The female dependent's loose tunic did nothing to conceal her condition.

On the steps of the temple another woman lent on a broom. The other woman was abstracted. You would have said that the other woman didn't know where she was, and that the other woman did not really understand what she was doing.

The temple was quiet. The temple was still. The only sounds in the temple were the sounds that drifted over the wall from the City.

There was no bustle in the warehouse. There was no clicking of looms in the weaving sheds. There was no singing as the women worked. There was no braying of mules from the stables. No onagers were kicking in the stalls.

The dust lay thick in the courtyard. The dust puffed and eddied in the breeze. The dust was thick on the steps of the temple.

Above the courtyard a buzzard circled. The buzzard had come in from the desert.

No-one looked up.

The Arch Priestess turned to the doorway behind her. The Arch Priestess beckoned. The Custodian of the Nine-carat Ceremonial Chalice shuffled out. The Custodian of the Nine-carat Ceremonial Chalice's knee was giving him problems.

'I shall inspect the warehouses this morning,' the Arch Priestess announced. Behind the Arch Priestess the servant of her body bit her lip.

'Have your inventories ready,' the Arch Priestess informed the Custodian.

'Then this afternoon I wish to visit the fields and inspect the harvest.'

'Serenity,' the Custodian replied.

The Custodian looked away. The Custodian breathed deeply. The Custodian spoke again.

'Your Serenity inspected the warehouses yesterday,' the Custodian told her.

'I did?'

The Arch Priestess was puzzled. Yesterday was a long time ago.

'Serenity,' the Custodian confirmed.

'And was everything in order?' the Arch Priestess queried.

The Arch Priestess was clearly quite worried.

'In perfect order, Serenity,' the Custodian assured her.

'You expressed yourself most pleased.'

'Most pleased?'

The Arch Priestess was nervous. It seemed unlike the Arch Priestess when inspecting warehouses to be quite as pleased as that.

'Indeed, Serenity.'

The Custodian was confident.

'In that case,' said the Arch Priestess, 'we shall go to the fields. Have wagons prepared.'

'Serenity,' said the Custodian.

The Custodian was getting a little exasperated.

'The murrain in your Serenity's stables has not yet run its course. The hands will have difficulty assembling a full team for a few days yet.'

The Arch Priestess looked disapproving.

'They are Enki's stables, Custodian. They are not mine.'

'Indeed, Serenity,' said the Custodian.

'Most correct,' the Custodian conceded.

'In that case,' said the Arch Priestess.

'In that case,' said the Custodian, 'your Serenity may wish to return to her private quarters and perform her private devotions.'

The Arch Priestess looked puzzled. The Arch Priestess looked at her attendant. The attendant looked blank.

'We performed our private devotions yesterday,' the Arch Priestess said.

The Custodian said nothing.

'I am sure I performed my devotions,' the Arch Priestess said.

The Custodian nodded.

'Your Serenity will just have time,' the Custodian said, 'before she robes to receive her guests.'

'Ah!' said the Arch Priestess.

'Guests?'

The Custodian turned. The Custodian faced the doorway to the private quarters. The Custodian held out his arm to one side.

The Arch Priestess turned. The Arch Priestess preceded the Custodian.

Behind the Arch Priestess's back the Custodian stared at the Arch Priestess's attendant. The Custodian was daring the Arch Priestess's attendant to say a word.

Above the courtyard the buzzard still circled. The flight of the buzzard maintained the same consistent speed and described the same radius.

Buzzards do not tire.

10

'You know,' said Shag 'em All, 'I'm not really sure that you should be asking that sort of question.'

Fastidious Youth nodded, rather vigorously.

'Um-hmm,' Fastidious Youth went.

'Um-hmm.'

'I, er, find the whole subject fascinating,' the Wooden God said.

'I have a nearly insatiable curiosity about very many aspects of human life.'

The young people twisted their necks. The young people turned up their faces to look at the Wooden God.

The Wooden God caressed his beard with the fingers of one hand. The Wooden God tapped the butt of his staff on the plinth several times with the other. The Wooden God was clearly nervous.

'Miau,' went the cat.

The cat turned over on her other side.

Fastidious Youth spoke.

'This was a private conversation,' Fastidious Youth said.

Shag 'em All turned to look at him.

'Mmm,' Shag 'em All went.

Shag 'em All's tone and her expression were both warm. Shag 'em All's did so like Fastidious Youth when he was assertive. Fastidious Youth was so calm and so mild – and yet at the same time so firm.

The Wooden God sighed. The Wooden God sighed rather deeply. The Wooden God's grip on his staff was becoming unnecessarily tight. The butt of his staff positively rattled. The Wooden God was shaking his head. You could hear the rustling of the ivy in the Wooden God's ear.

The Wooden God burst out.

'You lot don't understand about loneliness,' the Wooden God said.

The Wooden God's tone was plaintive. The Wooden God was almost in tears.

'You can have no possible conception of the true existential meaning of loneliness or of its spiritual and psychological import. How much time do you lot have to figure out the true meaning of loneliness? Three score years and fucking whatsit? Pah! I spit on the human lifespan! I have been lonely for thousands and thousands of years! For tens of thousands of years!'

The Wooden God was becoming quite hysterical.

'Can I say something?' Fastidious Youth asked.

Shag 'em All looked at Fastidious Youth.

Shag 'em All's bosom rose. Shag 'em All's bosom fell. Shag 'em All's gaze was languorous.

Fastidious Youth was being really assertive.

'Yes,' said the Wooden God. The Wooden God was surprised. The Wooden God clearly hadn't expected anyone to address him so directly.

'Of course.'

The Wooden God shuffled his wooden feet. He was embarrassed as well as surprised.

'Please do.'

'Really it's a question,' said Fastidious Youth.

'Yes. Please,' said the Wooden God.

'Absolutely,' added the Wooden God.

The Wooden God was very nervous.

Fastidious Youth lifted his head. Fastidious Youth straightened his back.

Fastidious Youth moved his knees to the left.

Shag 'em All had to move as well.

Fastidious Youth glanced at Shag 'em All. Fastidious Youth held up his hand in apology. Fastidious Youth's knees were intruding on her space. Then Fastidious Youth made eye-contact with the Wooden God.

With the fingertips of her left hand Shag 'em All lightly touched the forearm of Fastidious Youth. Fastidious Youth briefly glanced at Shag 'em All again in acknowledgement. With her right hand Shag 'em All grasped the silver amulet of Erzulie in her bosom.

Shag 'em All gazed on Fastidious Youth with open fondness. Shag 'em All's eyes were wide. Shag 'em All's lips were relaxed. Shag 'em All's breathing was deep and regular.

'What do you want?' said Fastidious Youth to the Wooden God.

Fastidious Youth waited a moment for the question to sink in and be processed.

The Wooden God gulped.

'I, er....' the Wooden God managed.

Fastidious Youth calmly proceeded to ask another question. There was an air of practiced skill about the way the intervention was structured.

'What would you like us to do?' Fastidious Youth asked.

Shag 'em All gasped.

'Oh!' Shag 'em All went.

Sometimes Fastidious Youth was *so* intelligent.

The Wooden God's mouth opened and shut repeatedly. No sound emerged.

The Wooden God was a goldfish who had lost his bowl.

11

The torturers marched out onto the causeway across the bridge.

The Night Watch inside the gate made a line across the road. The Night Watch grasped their spears with both hands. The Night Watch held their spears horizontal across their chests.

The Night Watch pushed back against the crowd of Citizens and the mob of Little People. The Night Watch kept the crowd of Citizens and the mob of Little People off the roadway and inside the City.

The people pushed and shoved. Sometimes the people pushed the Night Watch back. The Watch levelled their spears. The people retreated.

It was a game. Everyone understood the limits.

The people were excited. The people shouted. The people sweated. The people's faces glowed.

The Night Watch was only doing this duty because the Day Guard had been disbanded. The Day Guard had been demobilised on efficiency grounds. The measure was part of the package of reforms that the Lord of the Upper Vineyard had introduced in order to support the value in international trade of the silver ingot.

The merchants in the river port were still waiting for results. The Day Guard had acted quite decisively. They had left the City and taken to banditry on the roads.

The torturers held the horseman between them. The torturers dwarfed the horseman. The horseman stumbled. The horseman's hands were bound. The horseman couldn't help himself. The horseman staggered.

The torturers didn't break step. The horseman twisted in the torturers' hands. The horseman was a fragment of bark in a mountain stream. The horseman's feet dragged. The torturers marched on. The horseman was valueless to them.

The torturers were half-way across the bridge. The line of Night Watch parted. Two chariots drove out. Good Looks the Playboy drove the first. The women sighed. Good Looks ignored the women. Good Looks had eyes only for his horses.

The chariots kept to walking speed. The archers and the spearmen in the backs of the chariots watched the torturers. Sometimes the archers and the spearmen glanced up. The archers and the spearmen looked at the cliff above the river. The morning sun sparkled on the cliffs below the edge.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool drove out on to the bridge. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool were riding four-wheeled carts. The carts were drawn by onagers. The drivers had shaven heads. The drivers were slaves.

There were Little People riding in the back of the carts. The Little People kept their heads down. The Little People's shoulders were rounded. The Little People were waiting to serve.

The offside onager in the team that drew the Lord of the Upper Vineyard was showing its species-specific tendency to bad temper. The offside onager was biting its team-mate's neck.

A squad of guards followed the four-wheeled carts. The corporal marched to one side. The guards kept their eyes down. The horseman was one of theirs.

The torturers reached the end of the bridge. The torturers walked out onto the Royal Road. The torturers turned right in front of the crowds on the opposite bank. The torturers walked along the levée.

The horseman was barely visible between the bulk of the torturers' bodies. The horseman's head hung. Some of the watchers on the bank could see the horseman's bound hands.

The Free Citizens lined the wharves. Some of the Free Citizens' wives had left their houses. The Free Citizens' wives wanted to see this. Some of the Free Citizens' wives had brought their children.

The Free Citizens stood shoulder to shoulder. The Free Citizens stared.

The Free Citizens watched the torturers drag the horseman along the towpath under the date palms. The Free Citizens could imagine the fields beyond. The Free Citizens could picture the canals. The Free Citizens understood the way the canals carried the water to the fields when the river was high.

The Free Citizens went to the fields across the river sometimes. Some of the Free Citizens still had family property. The Free Citizens had fields that had not been forfeit to the temples and the merchants in payment of a debt.

The Little People did not go down to the wharves. The Little People did not need the Night Watch to use the butts of their spears to drive them back. The Little People just did not go.

The Little People crowded on the walls of the temples. The Little People stood on the roofs of the merchants' houses.

The Little People knew the fields better than the Free Citizens. The Little People worked the fields.

The Little People broke the soil. The Little People broadcast seed. The Little People hoed. The Little People weeded. The Little People reaped.

The Little People did not own property in the narrow alluvial strip beyond the river. The Little People were the property.

The crowds were silent. There was the sound of voices in the streets behind them. There was the faint rumble of wooden wheels on cobbles. There was the distant braying of an onager.

The crowds stood. The crowds watched.

The sentries were drawn up on the battlements of the citadel. The sentries' tunics flapped in the wind. The sentries' spears were planted at rest.

The sentries watched. The sentries were silent.

The sergeant paced. The sergeant paced from the watchtower half-way along the parapet to the next one. Sometimes the sergeant glanced over the roofs of the Old City towards the river. Sometimes the sergeant muttered.

The sergeant was making the guards very uncomfortable. None of the guards turned round. None of the guards wanted to let the sergeant see how uncomfortable they were. Feelings were not viewed favourably in the closed society of military men.

12

'I, er....' mumbled the Wooden God.

Fastidious Youth looked at the Wooden God. Fastidious Youth's gaze was direct. Fastidious Youth's expression was refreshingly open. Fastidious Youth's demeanour was encouraging.

Fastidious Youth knew exactly what he was doing.

Shag 'em All was looking at Fastidious Youth.

'I, er....' stammered the Wooden God.

The young people went on looking. Fastidious Youth was looking at the Wooden God. Shag 'em All looked at Fastidious Youth.

'You could talk to me,' the Wooden God blurted out.

Fastidious Youth nodded. Fastidious Youth was still waiting. Fastidious Youth was leaving the Wooden God enough space.

'I mean, what's so difficult about that?' the Wooden God expostulated. 'All I'm asking for is a bit of conversation.'

'We can talk to you,' Fastidious Youth said.

Fastidious Youth's tone was reassuring.

'Really?' asked the Wooden God.

'You can talk to me?'

The Wooden God sounded quite alarmed.

'We can talk to you,' Fastidious Youth told him.

'We can have a conversation.'

Fastidious Youth was still nodding. Fastidious Youth was nodding less emphatically.

'But,' said the Wooden God.

The Wooden God looked around.

'But,' the Wooden God repeated.

The Wooden God was getting rather confused.

The Wooden God burst out again.

'But your lady friend is really annoyed with me,' the Wooden God said.

Fastidious Youth nodded again a couple of times.

'I think that's all right,' Fastidious Youth said.

Fastidious Youth glanced questioningly at Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All sighed. Shag 'em All brushed her hair back from her forehead.

Shag 'em All's hair didn't need brushing, but that's what Shag 'em All did.

Shag 'em All glanced up. Shag 'em All didn't glance high enough to make eye contact with the Wooden God, but Shag 'em All did glance up.

'I suppose,' Shag 'em All conceded.

Shag 'em All made no effort to conceal her irritation. In fact one might have thought Shag 'em All was laying it on just a little bit.

Fastidious Youth looked at Shag 'em All directly. You would have said it was a meaningful look. You would not have been very sure what the look meant.

'I suppose there could be reasons why someone has no awareness of his impact on others,' Shag 'em All said.

'Oh!' went the Wooden God.

The Wooden God was clearly offended.

Shag 'em All swept her hair off one ear with the back of her hand. Shag 'em All swept it back over her shoulder. I am sure I hardly need point out that Shag 'em All's hair did not need any sweeping at that particular moment in time.

'Some people just don't know how intrusive they're being,' Shag 'em All said.

'I, I....' stammered the Wooden God. 'I....'

Shag 'em All made eye contact.

'Some people don't know when they're not wanted.'

Shag 'em All waited. Shag 'em All wanted to see the barb sink home.

'I, I....' expostulated the Wooden God, 'I haven't had a decent conversation for twenty thousand years.'

Shag 'em All smiled at him sweetly. Shag 'em All only smiled with her mouth.

'Is there a reason for that?' Shag 'em All asked.

Fastidious Youth put out a hand. Fastidious Youth shook his head a couple of times.

'Oh!' went Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All flipped her hair off her other ear. Shag 'em All drew up her knees. Shag 'em All put her elbows on her knees.

Shag 'em All put her chin in her hands. Shag 'em All looked away Shag 'em All looked at the baked earth of the surface of the square.

Fastidious Youth looked back at the Wooden God.

'It sounds as if you are....' Fastidious Youth began.

The Wooden God nodded furiously. The Wooden God really wanted Fastidious Youth to say what he was saying. The Wooden God would not have done quite anything to encourage him to continue but he would have done quite a lot.

Fastidious Youth finished his sentence.

'Isolated,' Fastidious Youth said.

'Isolated!' the Wooden God repeated.

The Wooden God was almost shouting.

'I have experienced a millennial isolation of which mere mortals could hardly conceive!' the Wooden God expostulated.

Shag 'em All raised her eyebrows.

'Mere mortals?' Shag 'em All repeated.

Shag 'em All gave the phrase with a questioning intonation.

'Huh!' Shag 'em All went.

'I have been spurned,' announced the Wooden God.

'I have been cast out. I have been hurled into the outer darkness. I have been marginalised. I have been excluded. I have been stigmatised. I have been stereotyped. I have suffered discrimination. I have been deprived of my rights. I have been rejected.'

The Wooden God sobbed out loud. The Wooden God sobbed just once. Then the Wooden God went on.

'I have been humiliated,' the Wooden God declared.

'I have been ostracised. I have been exiled. I have been driven out.'

The Wooden God paused. The Wooden God was fairly clearly pausing for effect.

'And you ask whether I am isolated?' the Wooden God demanded rhetorically.

The Wooden God was breathing heavily.

Shag 'em All looked up at him. Shag 'em All smiled sweetly again.

'Why?' Shag 'em All asked.

The Wooden God stared. The Wooden God was speechless. The Wooden God's mouth fell open. No sound came. The Wooden God was clearly horrified.

'Why?' the Wooden God finally managed to shriek.

'Why?' the Wooden God protested.

'What do you mean, why?'

'Why?' asked Shag 'em All, in her most innocent tone.

'Why does nobody like you?' Shag 'em All asked.

Shag 'em All was being a little bit of a bitch.

13

The strip of fields narrowed. The cliffs came near to the river. The Royal Road turned. The Royal Road turned back on itself. The Royal Road started to climb up the face of the cliff.

The torturers turned. The torturers marched round the hairpin bend. The torturers dragged the horseman with them. The crowd sighed. Perhaps the crowd were thinking of the road to the West.

The tips of the spears lined up on the battlements wavered. The guards were thinking of the road to the North. The guards knew it well.

‘Attention!’ shouted the sergeant.

The shout sounded like a warning. The tips of the spears became still.

The wagons turned the bend. The soldiers and the corporal followed. The wagons and the soldiers and the corporal climbed.

The crowd stared. You would have sworn the crowd were holding their breath.

The crowd watched while the torturers and the chariots and the wagons and the corporal’s guard made their way up the series of gradients and round the hairpin bends. The crowd waited.

The crowd waited while the sun rose over the Eastern cliffs behind the city. The crowd waited while the sun rose above the walls of the citadel and the roofs of the temples. The crowd stood in silence while the morning sun beat down.

The crowd needed the little procession to make it to the top of the cliff. The crowd knew the procession would make it.

The crowd would not breathe easily until the procession did make it. The crowd needed to see it happen.

The torturers reached the top. The torturers dragged the horseman past a tree. The sentry who had seen the horseman first glanced up. It was the tree where the sentry had seen the horseman on the first morning.

The sentry looked a little to the right. The sentry saw the House of the God a few yards from the tree.

The sentry shuffled. The butt of the sentry's spear tapped on the stones. The spear was a blind man's stick.

The sergeant glanced at the sentry. The sergeant said nothing.

The sergeant glanced up. The sergeant looked at the top of the cliff across the river. The sergeant looked at the tree.

The sergeant looked a little to the right. The sergeant looked at the House of the God. That's where the sergeant had seen the horseman too.

The torturers stopped. The torturers stood by the edge of the cliff. The torturers turned to face the City. The horseman turned with them. The horseman could do no other.

The crowd down below on the river bank breathed. The torturers waited. The horseman sagged.

The place where the torturers were waiting did not seem like anywhere in particular. There were no buildings. No walls. No markers. No stelae. No sculpted stones.

The torturers knew where it was.

The wagons halted. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool dismounted. The drivers held the onagers.

The chariots circled round. The chariots drew up some distance behind the wagons. The chariots faced the City across the river.

The servants came forward. The servants made a fire. The servants set up a tripod. The servants hung a shallow brass dish above the fire.

The guards formed two lines. The lines closed off a space between the wagons and the torturers. The tripod and the fire were in the centre of the space.

The corporal hung back. The corporal stood awkwardly by the wagons. The corporal looked at no-one.

The guards were awkward. The guards did not look at each other. The guards did not look at the torturers.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool came forward. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool stood on opposite sides of the fire. In the morning light the crowds on the river bank below could see the tiny figures clearly.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool waited till the flames took hold. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool threw herbs in the fire. Smoke rose.

The crowd on the river bank sniffed. The crowd knew the aroma. The crowd could not possibly smell it at that distance. The crowd could imagine.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool stretched out their hands. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool held their hands with the palms downward.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool muttered. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool each muttered in turn. The muttering was a liturgy.

The lips of some of the people on the river bank were moving. The people knew the words.

The flames died down. The smoke stopped rising. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool lowered their hands.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard turned. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard took a step. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard glanced at the corporal. The Lord of the Upper Vineyard nodded.

The corporal raised his clenched fist. The corporal held his forearm horizontal across his chest. The corporal kept his fist clenched.

The corporal marched off. The corporal marched past The Lord of the Upper Vineyard. The corporal kept his eyes front.

The corporal halted at the end of the line of guards. The corporal faced left. The corporal faced the torturers. The corporal nodded.

One of the torturers nodded back.

The torturers tightened their grip on the upper arms of the horseman hanging between them. The horseman's head came up.

The horseman was too far from the crowds on the riverbank for them to see his face. Some of the crowd imagined that they could.

The tips of the spears of the double line of guards on the top of the cliff shook visibly. The spears were corn in the wind. The tips of the spears of the guards on the parapet of the citadel shook as well.

The torturers took a step or two. The torturers stood at the edge of the cliff. The torturers did not drag the horseman. The horseman walked like a man.

The crowd on the river bank sighed. The line of the guards on the parapet rustled. The line of guards on the parapet were leaves in a breeze.

The torturers turned inwards. The torturers did not move their feet. The torturers looked briefly towards each other.

The torturers swung. The body of the horseman rose.

I think it is quite appropriate to speak of the horseman's body, even though at this moment he was still alive.

The horseman's feet hung. The crowd on the river bank gasped. The torsos of the torturers rolled. The horseman flew.

On the way down the horseman screamed. The horseman started screaming at the height of the parabola that carried him over the cliff edge.

Later no-one who watched the horseman from the river bank could have said how long it took him to fall. It was a long way down.

The impact that the horseman's body made when it hit could not possibly have been heard across the river. Many of the watchers on the river bank would swear afterwards that they did so hear the impact.

The crowd groaned.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool turned.

The Lord of the Upper Vineyard and the Master of the Close Stool walked back to their wagons.

The servants disassembled the tripod. The servants packed up the bowl.

The torturers turned. The torturers walked back from the cliff edge between the double lines of guards. No-one on the river bank could see the hatred in the eyes of the soldiers. The people on the river bank could imagine it.

The Little People climbed down from the walls of the temples and the roofs of the merchants' houses. The crowd on the river bank broke up.

The Night Watch shouldered their spears. The Night Watch straggled off.

On the battlements of the citadel the sergeant waited. When the cliff-top across the river the other side of the City was clear the sergeant would give a command.

The sentries waited patiently for the sergeant to give the command. Waiting patiently for sergeants to give commands is what soldiers have done for the whole of recorded history.

They were probably doing it before.

14

On a shelf on the wall of the workshop stood an image of Enki. The image was one of the cheap ones that were sold in the market place. The features of the image were indistinct. The jaguar's pelt had no nap. The stick the God held over his shoulder was a thin, flimsy thing. The stick was more of a cudgel than a club.

The First Citizen tapped his chisel against the workbench. The First Citizen tapped the chisel slowly. The First Citizen tapped the chisel in a rhythm.

The chisel rang like a faint bell. The chisel rang like the bell in a village in a valley where the people know that the enemy are coming.

The Council of Free Citizens looked uncomfortable. One of the Council examined his fingernails. The Council member's fingernails were black and bitten. Another member of the Council shuffled his feet on the sandy floor of the workshop.

A third member of the Council turned his head. The third member of the Council craned his neck.

With the shutters down the workshop was open to the street. Anyone could be out there. Anybody could see.

'We don't need armour,' the First Citizen said.

The Council of Free Citizens looked even more uncomfortable. One or two of the members of the Council opened their mouths. The members of the Council wanted to speak.

The First Citizen raised his voice. The First Citizen didn't raise it very much. The First Citizen raised it enough to be noticed. The First Citizen didn't look at his council.

'We need spears,' the First Citizen said.

'Long spears.'

The members of the Council shuffled. The First Citizen raised his voice again.

'We need points,' the First Citizen said.

'Metal points. For the spears. That is where our smiths can help us.'

The First Citizen smiled.

Several of the members of the Council stood with their arms folded. Several of the members of the Council looked around. Several of the members of the Council were clearly unhappy.

The men with their arms folded were burly. The burly men with their arms folded were probably the smiths.

A young man leaning against the wall of the shed straightened up. The young man had long hair. The young man's tunic was belted with a leather thong.

The young man looked directly at the First Citizen.

'What about the Elder Brothers?' the young man asked.

The young man held the First Citizen's gaze.

Some of the members of the Council looked down. The members of the Council stared at the sandy floor of the workshop. Some of the members of the Council looked away.

One or two of the members of the Council couldn't look away. One or two of the members of the Council were mesmerised by the stand-off.

The First Citizen stared at the young man. The First Citizen couldn't stare him down.

The young man was the First Citizen's sister's son. The First Citizen's sister was a widow.

The young man was grown.

The First Citizen spoke.

'Our Citizens will stand together.'

Sister's Son opened his mouth. The First Citizen raised his chin. The First Citizen over-talked Sister's Son.

'Our Citizens will stand shoulder to shoulder. Our Citizens will stand in ranks. No horse will ride against a hedge of spear-points.'

The members of the Council murmured and nodded. The members of the Council had to admit the justice of the proposition just advanced.

Sister's Son looked aside. Sister's Son looked down. Then Sister's Son held his head up again. Sister's Son looked at the First Citizen.

'What if the Elder Brothers stand off?' Sister's Son said.

First Citizen looked blank.

'What about the archers?' Sister's Son said.

'They will loose their arrows from a distance. They will break the ranks.'

The members of the Council looked up. The members of the Council looked at each other. The members of the Council nodded.

Sister's Son pushed his point home.

'The chariots will ride into the gaps.'

First Citizen threw his chisel down. One or two of the members of the Council started. One or two of the members of the Council flinched.

The First Citizen stared up at the statue of Enki on the shelf. The First Citizen's eyes glittered.

'We will do what the Riders do,' the First Citizen announced.

The First Citizen was loud now. The First Citizen was angry.

'Our young men will run in among the chariots,' the First Citizen proclaimed.

'Three or four together. They will have long swords. They will slash the traces. They will hamstring the horses. They will let the chariots pass. They will stab the spearmen from behind.'

First Citizen looked round. First Citizen was irritated. Perhaps First Citizen had not wanted to reveal so much.

The First Citizen said nothing about the manufacture of the long swords, or the quantities of iron involved.

First Citizen smiled. The First Citizen's eyes lips were tight. The First Citizen's eyes were narrow.

'The young men will bring the Elder Brothers down.'

First Citizen sounded triumphant.

The members of the Council shifted. The members of the Council shuffled. The members of the Council nodded. The members of the Council looked up. The members of the Council looked at the ceiling of the shed. The members of the Council looked at each other. The members of the Council said nothing.

The members of the Council looked back at First Citizen.

First Citizen waited. First Citizen waited till he had the attention of the members of the Council.

'Our married men are steady,' the First Citizen said.

First Citizen paused. First Citizen watched the members of the Council.

The members of the Council nodded. The members of the Council were not happy.

'The married men will stand firm,' said the First Citizen.

'The married men will not break.'

The members of the Council looked at each other.

The members of the Council were the married men. The members of the Council would be doing the standing firm.

The members of the Council scrutinised each other. The members of the Council were wondering who would break first.

First Citizen waited. First Citizen waited till he had the attention of the members of the Council again.

'Our young men are brave,' First Citizen said.

The members of the Council nodded. The faces of the members of the Council faces relaxed.

Most of the members of the Council had sons. You could hardly expect the members of the Council to dissent from such a self-evident proposition.

'Our young men,' said First Citizen, 'are not afraid to die.'

There was an intake of breath. Shoulders went up. Feet were uncrossed and crossed again.

None of the members of the Council looked at First Citizen. None of the members of the Council looked at each other.

First Citizen stared at Sister's Son.

Sister's Son lifted his head. Sister's Son stared at First Citizen.

Neither the First Citizen nor Sister's Son looked away.

First Citizen stood away from the bench. First Citizen stood up straight. First Citizen held out his arms in front of him. First Citizen held the palms turned up.

First Citizen looked at the mass-produced image of Enki on the shelf.

The members of the Council shuffled. The members of the Council murmured. The members of the Council held their hands out too.

15

The Wooden God twisted his head around. The Wooden God looked from side to side. The Wooden God was clearly furious.

The cat was irritated. The cat yowled. The cat turned round. The cat lifted her haunches. The cat's little black bottom was pointed directly at the Wooden God's face.

The cat's tail was upright. The cat's tail waved. The cat's tail was a frond of a dangerous plant in a science fiction movie - a God-eating plant, perhaps.

The Wooden God seized his hat. The Wooden God whipped it off his head. The Wooden God held his hat out. The Wooden God pointed with the index finger of his free hand.

'Look! Look! Look!' the Wooden God said.

'Do you see this?'

The Wooden God was almost shouting.

The cat looked round. The cat turned over on her side and covered her little face with her paws. The cat was embarrassed.

'This is my hat, this is,' the Wooden God proclaimed.

Fastidious Youth looked up. Fastidious Youth nodded.

Fastidious Youth's expression was quite caring. His expression was also non-committal. Fastidious Youth wanted to know where the Wooden God was going.

Shag 'em All looked up. Shag 'em All nodded too. Shag 'em All's expression was a little grim.

'This is no ordinary hat,' the Wooden God proclaimed.

'This is a wanderer's hat. It is the hat of an individual or an entity – I was initially tempted to say of a person, but that would not be quite correct – who is dedicated to wandering as a way not so much of life – life is so limited, so human, so merely human – but as a way of being and existence. And look! Look! Look!'

The Wooden God turned the hat over. The Wooden God jabbed at the crown of the hat with his fingertip.

'There is a hole in this hat! Yes! Yes! Yes! A hole!'

Fastidious Youth looked. Fastidious Youth raised his eyebrows. Fastidious Youth was not sure.

Shag 'em All put her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. Shag 'em All looked at Fastidious Youth. Shag 'em All shook her head. Shag 'em All wasn't sure either.

'And look! Look! Look!'

The Wooden God jabbed his finger repeatedly.

The young people looked.

'The sides of this hole,' the Wooden God proclaimed, 'are burned.'

The Wooden God's tone was somewhat self-important. The Wooden God seemed to think that the implications of what he had just said would be self-evident.

The young people looked. The edges of the gash in the hat were ragged and blackened. It did indeed look as if the sides of the hole had been burned and that the ash had fallen away. Something nasty had clearly happened to the hat.

'And look! Look!'

The hand that was holding the hat dropped away. The hat, which moments ago had been the centre of attention, was suddenly not important any more.

The Wooden God bent his neck. The Wooden God lowered his head. The Wooden God jabbed his forefinger at the top of his cranium.

‘Oh my God!’ exclaimed Fastidious Youth.

The exclamation was quite spontaneous. Fastidious Youth wasn’t really an OMG sort of person. Fastidious Youth was far too serious.

There was an open wound in the top of the Wooden God’s skull. The edges of the wound were charred and blackened. The wound exactly matched the gash in the crown of the hat.

The Wooden God put the hat back. The Wooden God folded his hands over his belly. The Wooden God kept his staff upright in the crook of his elbow. The Wooden God looked down at Fastidious Youth. The Wooden God nodded. The nodding was very meaningful.

The cat draped herself across the Wooden God’s shoulder. The cat’s paws hung down. The cat stared at the young people. The cat started to purr.

‘How...?’ spluttered Fastidious Youth.

‘How...?’ Fastidious Youth croaked.

The Wooden God smirked. The Wooden God waited.

‘How did that happen?’ Fastidious Youth blurted out.

‘Lightning,’ the Wooden God announced.

Shag ‘em All twisted her head round. Shag ‘em All looked up.

‘You went out in the rain?’ Shag ‘em All demanded.

Shag 'em All was clearly surprised that anyone – let alone a God – would be capable of such foolishness and imprudence.

The Wooden God sighed. The Wooden God's sigh was exasperated. His sigh was almost a snarl.

'What is it you people don't get about thunderbolts?'

The Wooden God's tone was openly contemptuous.

'A thunderbolt?' said Fastidious Youth. Fastidious Youth almost gasped.

'How did that happen?'

The Wooden God smiled. In a perverse way the Wooden God was clearly quite proud.

'It was hurled,' the Wooden God said.

'Flung. Tossed. Thrown. By the hand of an omnipotent power. An irresistible force.'

'Who...?' stammered Fastidious Youth.

'Who did this to you?'

The Wooden God's face twisted up. The Wooden God's eyes rolled around. The Wooden God looked from side to side.

'Can't remember,' muttered the Wooden God.

The Wooden God sounded quite sulky.

'You can't remember?' asked Fastidious Youth.

Fastidious Youth really didn't understand. Fastidious Youth's question sounded somewhat inane.

'Top geezer,' said the Wooden God.

'Clouds. Mountain top.'

'So you do remember?' said Fastidious Youth.

The Wooden God shook not merely his head but the whole of his upper torso.

'Sometimes,' the Wooden God said.

'Sometimes it's almost there.'

The Wooden God put out his hand with the palm down and the fingers outstretched.

'Sometimes I almost think I can touch it.'

The Wooden God dropped his hand.

'Then I don't.'

'Why don't you remember?' asked Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All was genuinely curious. One would have thought for a moment that Shag 'em All was really interested in the Wooden God.

'Trauma,' the Wooden God said shortly.

'Post-traumatic amnesia. Brain damage.'

'God, that's awful,' said Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All sounded genuinely sympathetic.

The Wooden God opened his mouth.

'You'll never be able to get the memories back, will you?' said Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All smiled sweetly.

The Wooden God closed his mouth again.

The cat put out one paw. The claws weren't extended. The cat patted the god on his cheek. The Wooden God didn't seem to notice.

Fastidious Youth looked at Shag 'em All. Fastidious Youth waited till she made eye contact.

'Or forgive whoever it was who did it,' Fastidious Youth said.

'Oh!' went Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All didn't want a quarrel. She clearly didn't agree.

Shag 'em All looked away. Shag 'em All stared at the wooden feet of the statue on the plinth. Then Shag 'em All turned her head away. Shag 'em All stared at the packed earth of the square.

A drop of moisture collected in the corner of the Wooden God's wooden eye. The drop of moisture became heavy. The drop of moisture rolled out onto the Wooden God's wooden cheek. The drop of moisture slithered down.

The inanimate material from which the Wooden God had been carved was clearly undergoing a metamorphosis of some kind. This is in complete contradiction to the natural laws of the universe. Whatever will happen next?

I am becoming somewhat suspicious of the aesthetic principles of the textual narrative we are currently studying together. The textual narrative does not follow at all closely the principles laid out so authoritatively in Creative Writing 901. The textual narrative does not appear to have been workshopped, or indeed even properly critiqued.

I am quite worried about the wider implications of these omissions and oversights. It is a terrible example to the creative and aspirational among the nation's youth.

How can the value of the MA in creative writing be properly maintained if perfectly random members of the general public feel at liberty to write in this anarchic, egalitarian and anti-authoritarian manner?

Those people seem to think they can do what they want.

16

The Last King of the Old City lounged on his throne in the Hall of Recitals. The Last King of the Old City was if anything even more languid than the time before.

The Master of the Lower Vineyard and the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool stood before him. The Master of the Lower Vineyard and the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool looked at best impassive; at worst, po-faced.

The Last King was flanked as usual by his guards. The guards stood to attention on either side of his throne with the butts of their spears grounded. The guards were completely still. The guards no more moved than the *bas-relief* of the marching God from the frieze. The guards appeared not even to breathe.

‘We shall have the priests determine the impiety,’ the Last King announced.

‘The priests will perform their sacrifices. The priests will inspect the entrails. The priests will consult the records of the omens and the portents. The priests will watch the stars.’

The Last King paused. The chin of the Last King sank. Perhaps the Last King was contemplating the thought of so much activity among the priesthood. Perhaps the contemplation comforted him.

The Last King raised his head.

‘The priests will discover the source of the sacrilege,’ the Last King affirmed.

The king lapsed into thought.

The king raised one hand. The king turned his one hand over. The king held his one hand with the palm upright.

The king smiled. It was an unpleasant expression.

'If they do not,' the king said, 'we shall have them thrown from the cliff. In chains.'

The king giggled. The giggle was high-pitched and staccato. It was an embarrassing giggle. The king was after all the Last King.

A sensitive observer might have thought for a moment that the eyes of the guards, or the eyes of at least one of them, widened slightly. Being a sensitive observer he would have told himself that he – we use the so-called masculine pronoun simply for ease of reference and with no prejudice as to putative gender identity, the lady Erzulie protect us from such things – was imagining it. This would have left the observer at a loss when the head of the Master of the Lower Vineyard appeared to incline forward – though it was very much short of a nod, very much short – the eyebrows of the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool appeared to rise, the Marching God winced and the bald-headed god with the fat belly looked as if he was about to belch in disgust.

Fortunately the Last King stopped giggling.

'We will hunt down the impious,' said the Last King.

'We will smoke out the sacrilegious.'

The Last King seemed to relish the prospect.

'We will make sacrifices,' the Last King announced.

'They will be the most magnificent sacrifices that have been seen for years. They will be more magnificent than the sacrifices in the time of my fathers.'

The scalp of the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool appeared almost imperceptibly to contract.

The Last King continued.

'We will garland the statues. We will carry them through the City.'

The Last King was entranced at the prospect.

'The maidens will copulate with the young men in the streets.'

Once again the king giggled. Fortunately this time the Last King giggled more briefly.

'The Four Gods will smile on us once more. They will smile on my house.

They will smile on the land.'

The Last King turned his face up towards the ceiling of the Hall of Recitals.

The Last King's eyes rolled up. The Last King's mouth opened. The Last King's cheeks slackened. The Last King looked very silly.

'Majesty?' interjected the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool.

The Last King turned his head. The Last King turned sharply. The Last King glared at the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool. The Last King's brows contracted.

'Practical steps, your majesty?' the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool enquired.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool's tone seemed quite deferential.

'Ah!' said the Last King.

'Of course! There will be many! They will be very practical steps.'

'Including, majesty...?' the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool asked.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool raised his eyebrows slightly.

The Last King shook his head rapidly several times. The Last King might have been trying to clear his head.

'Including,' said the Last King.

'Including.... Yes. Of course. Including!'

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool did not speak. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool raised his eyebrows a little more.

'Including vigorous military action on all our frontiers!' the Last King announced.

The Last King flung out his arm dramatically.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool stared.

'We shall raise a militia of spearmen from among the farmers!' the Last King announced.

'They will reinforce our garrisons!' the Last King announced.

'Our horsemen will drive the Riders back!'

The Last King clenched his fist.

'They will drive them back to the shores of the sea.'

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool looked at the Master of the Lower Vineyard.

'We shall raise a new battalion of charioteers,' the Last King declared.

'We shall make a *promenade militaire* against the upstarts of Mitanni.'

The Master of the Lower Vineyard looked at the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool looked at the Last King.

'I know, I know,' said the Last King.

'We shall obtain horses from the mountains in the east. We shall train them. We shall use the silver from the vaults beneath the treasury.'

The Master of the Lower Vineyard sighed openly. The Last King was surpassing even the lyrical efforts of the dead poets.

17

The Custodian of the Nine-carat Chalice walked into the Arch Priestess's boudoir.

The Custodian of the Nine-carat Chalice was hobbling a little. His knee was still stiff.

The Custodian of the Nine-carat Chalice stood with his back to the doorway.

The Arch Priestess started. The Arch Priestess leaped up.

'My attendants!' exclaimed the Arch Priestess.

'Where are...?'

'They have gone on errands,' said the Custodian.

The Custodian spoke quietly. There was an undertone of something hard in the Custodian's voice.

The Arch Priestess's brows furrowed. The Arch Priestess was trying to remember.

'They will be back soon,' the Arch Priestess said.

Formally the Arch Priestess's remark was a statement. The statement had however a questioning tone.

The Custodian lifted his shoulders. The movement of his shoulders was barely perceptible. One would have hesitated to call the movement of his shoulders a shrug.

The Custodian took a step forwards.

The Arch Priestess leaped back. The Arch Priestess lifted her hands. It could have been a gesture either of fear or of supplication. Either sentiment would have been quite appropriate.

The Custodian's lips parted slightly. The tip of the Custodian's tongue became just visible. The Custodian's gaze was steady. The Custodian's gaze was focused on the Arch Priestess. There was something about The Arch Priestess's evident discomfiture that the Custodian seemed to relish.

'I shall scream,' said the Arch Priestess.

'I shall cry out. I shall call. I shall summon help.'

The Custodian took another step.

The Arch Priestess leaped back again. The Arch Priestess was nearly against the wall.

The Custodian's lips parted a little more. The corners of the Custodian's mouth turned up. You would have sworn that a fine thread of saliva hung from the Custodian's lip and touched his tongue.

'My guards!' exclaimed the Arch Priestess.

'The servants of my reception hall!'

The Arch Priestess looked the Custodian directly in the eye.

'They are big strong men,' the Arch Priestess informed him.

The Custodian grinned openly.

'You have no guards,' the Custodian sneered.

The Arch Priestess gasped.

'Oh!' the Arch Priestess went.

'Your servants have gone,' the Custodian said.

The Custodian was stating the obvious, like a policeman or a lawyer.

The Arch Priestess's knees were weak. The Arch Priestess was sinking down.

'I am the priestess of Enki!' the Arch Priestess cried.

'I am the servant of the God.'

'You are the servant of nothing,' the Custodian told her.

The Custodian reached out to grasp her wrist.

'Oh!' the Arch Priestess cried. The Arch Priestess fell to her knees on the floor.

'Your dependents have gone,' said the Custodian.

The Custodian's lips were pulled tight. The Custodian's eyes were narrow.

'Oh!' the Arch Priestess cried again.

The Arch Priestess was overtly distressed.

'Your dependents have gone over the wall,' the Custodian said.

'Your dependents are in the desert. Your dependents are tending sheep.'

The Custodian kept her wrist in his. The Custodian was grasping it tightly.

The Arch Priestess flexed her hand. The Arch Priestess pulled. The Arch Priestess could not break away.

The Custodian was stronger in the arms than his pale indoor face and his sedentary belly would suggest.

'If they didn't die on the road,' the Custodian said.

The Arch Priestess's arm went limp. The Arch Priestess's head hung. The Arch Priestess's gaze turned to the floor.

'They have abandoned you,' the Custodian told her.

The Custodian kept his eyes firmly fixed on her face.

The Arch Priestess gasped.

'They have abandoned your God,' the Custodian told her.

The Custodian said it with relish.

'Oh!' went the Arch Priestess.

The Arch Priestess's head came up again.

The Arch Priestess looked at the Custodian. The Arch Priestess bit her lip. The Arch Priestess glared. The Arch Priestess struggled.

The Custodian pulled the Arch Priestess by her wrist. The Arch Priestess resisted.

The Custodian grabbed the Arch Priestess's other wrist. The Arch Priestess screamed.

The Custodian pulled the Arch Priestess. The Arch Priestess knelt up.

The Custodian grinned. The Custodian jerked her hands straight up.

The Arch Priestess gasped. The Custodian had her off balance.

The Custodian threw the Arch Priestess down. The Arch Priestess fell heavily.

The Arch Priestess was winded.

The Custodian put one hand on the Arch Priestess's chest. The Custodian reached for the hem of the Arch Priestess's robe. The Custodian put one knee between the Arch Priestess's legs.

The Custodian stood up. The Custodian straightened his tunic. The Custodian walked towards the door. The Custodian walked easily. His hobble appeared to have gone.

The Arch Priestess sobbed. The Arch Priestess sobbed like a beaten child.

'You shouldn't even be a priestess,' the Custodian said.

The Arch Priestess felt his contempt. The Arch Priestess looked up. The Arch Priestess didn't stop sobbing.

'Everybody knows about your daughter,' the Custodian sneered.

The Custodian waited. The Custodian watched her.

The cruelty went home. The sobbing stopped. The Arch Priestess stared. The Arch Priestess was open-mouthed. The Arch Priestess's face was rigid in shock.

'Straighten your clothes,' the Custodian said.

'Don't lie there like a back street whore.'

The Custodian turned. He left.

18

Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All lounged on the plinth of the Wooden God's statue in the lengthening evening sun. Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All looked relaxed. Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All were not talking. Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All had no need to talk.

You would have said that Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All were happy. You would have been on safe ground.

Gently and rhythmically the Wooden God stroked his beard. His beard must have felt as smooth as silk.

On the Wooden God's shoulder the little cat quietly purred. The little cat was curled right up. Cats have extraordinarily flexible spines.

The brim of the Wooden God's anachronistic hat shaded his eyes. It was difficult to be sure of the Wooden God's expression. Under the brim of the hat you would have thought the Wooden God was looking down. A glimmer of expression passed over the Wooden God's wooden lips from time to time. It was either a trick of the light or a hint of a smile.

You might have thought that the Wooden God was smiling benignly at his new-found friends. And you might have thought that ten thousand years of celestial isolation were a good enough reason for feeling a bit benign from time to time.

A young man in a tunic slouched into the square through the gate. The young man kept his head down. The young man walked straight past the Stone in the Passway. The young man didn't look at the statute.

The young man's body language was furtive. Given the social and cultural conditions of the time and the terminal state of decline of the civilisation in which they were embedded, one would have thought that the furtiveness of the young man's body language was quite unnecessary.

The youth in the tunic made straight for the back of the wooden statue. The youth looked neither left nor right. The youth knew exactly where he was going. The youth had obviously been there before.

The youth in the tunic was followed through the gateway by a young woman dressed in an almost identical tunic. Such was the utilitarian fashion of the times. Think second millennium Mao suit – second millennium BC, that is. There were some concessions to femininity – the bangles and bracelets round the wrists and ankles, the locket round the neck, the longer hair.

The young woman reached out to the stone erection of the Stone in the Passway as she walked by. The young woman barely glanced at the little stone God. The young woman was clearly perfectly familiar with her surroundings.

The young woman gave the stone glans of the little stone God's penis an affectionate squeeze. The young woman had obviously been here before as well.

Shag 'em All turned her head. Shag 'em All faced towards Fastidious Youth.

Fastidious Youth turned his head as well. Fastidious Youth looked at Shag 'em All. Fastidious Youth made eye contact.

Shag 'em All lifted her eyebrows. Shag 'em All's eyebrows were rather pretty. Shag 'em All's eyebrows were very well-cared for.

Fastidious Youth gave no expressive response at all. The absence of response looked deliberate. It looked as if it took a certain effort.

Shag 'em All sat up. Shag 'em All stretched both arms above her head. Shag 'em All bangles and bracelets tinkled. Shag 'em All moaned voluptuously.

'Mmmmm.'

I apologise for the inadequacies of the phonetic rendition. There are some experiences which can only be suggested, and not in any real sense described.

Shag 'em All put her hands behind her kidneys. Shag 'em All's elbows were turned back. Shag 'em All arched her spine. Shag 'em All tossed her hair.

From behind the statue there came gruntings and heavings. The gruntings and heavings had a preliminary air. There was occasionally a more feminine gasp.

Shag 'em All twinkled roguishly.

I have to apologise both for the vulgar behaviour of one of my favourite characters – the character who is in fact the nearest thing this short novel has to a female protagonist, and who therefore has not only my personal sympathy but, as a rather strict formal requirement, my authorial endorsement – particularly since the character in question is usually anything but vulgar, and also for the vulgar expression which I have been obliged to use. I am, as some readers will no doubt have noticed independently, a generally quite fastidious writer.

'Those people are costing me money,' said Shag 'em All, with what could only be described as a roguish air.

I forebear to comment further.

Fastidious Youth straightened up. Fastidious Youth looked into the distance. In practice Fastidious Youth's vision was limited by the tiled roof of the building opposite – but the posture was quite expressive.

'Don't be anachronistic, darling,' said Fastidious Youth.

'Money hasn't been invented yet.'

'Oh!' expostulated Shag 'em All.

'You're such a fucking pedant. You know exactly what I mean.'

Shag 'em All dropped her hands from her kidneys. Shag 'em All placed one hand on the plinth. Shag 'em All put her weight on her hand.

Shag 'em All turned to face Fastidious Youth more directly. Shag 'em All leaned forward. Shag 'em All put her face so close to Fastidious Youth's face that Fastidious Youth was obliged to curb his fascination with the roof tiles.

Fastidious Youth raised his arm. Fastidious Youth lifted it over Shag 'em All's head. Fastidious Youth lowered it towards Shag 'em All's shoulders.

Shag 'em All's expression was transformed by a positively beatific glow. Shag 'em All looked rather smug. Shag 'em All leaned back into Fastidious Youth's protective embrace. Shag 'em All put her head on his shoulder.

'Mmmmm,' Shag 'em All went.

Above the heads of the contented young people the Wooden God coughed. The Wooden God appeared to be experiencing celestial embarrassment.

Shag 'em All rolled her eyes. Shag 'em All smirked. Shag 'em All obviously didn't care in the slightest whether anyone thought she was behaving in a vulgar manner or not.

Shag 'em All was happy.

19

'We are not worshipped,' said Erzulie.

'Oh!' said Baron Vendredi. 'I don't know that that's strictly true.'

'The dogs have abandoned us!' insisted Erzulie. Erzulie's voice whistled like the wind.

'Oh come now!' said Baron Vendredi.

Baron Vendredi was the patron deity of scribes in palace and temple service. Baron Vendredi felt it incumbent on him to be reasonable whenever possible.

'We are not worshipped as we once were, that I grant. The worship we receive is not adequate. That also I am perfectly willing to concede. We experience divine hunger - divine thirst. I am hardly in a position to disagree. But I find it very difficult to concede we are not worshipped at all. The claim, with the greatest respect, would seem to contradict the directly observable facts.'

Baron Vendredi was nothing if not reasonable.

'The dogs have lost their faith,' said Erzulie.

'They have ceased to fear.'

Erzulie's words ground against the stone.

'With respect, ma'am,' said Baron Vendredi.

Baron Vendredi could be very persistent when he felt that duty required.

'I spit on their meagre offerings!' cried Erzulie.

Erzulie's words were like icy rain. Erzulie's words hammered against the cliff.

'They were made to serve us!' Erzulie cried.

'We were not made for them!'

'What that lot fucking need is a good fucking plague,' announced Ogbun.

Ogbun had obviously been thinking. These comments were the somewhat meagre result of that – in his case – rather infrequent process. Ogbun was not concerned by the apparent irrelevance of his comment, or the tangential nature of his thought processes.

'Bit of extermination would do that lot a world of good,' Ogbun asserted.

Ogbun's words rattled like pebbles.

Ogbun continued. Ogbun was excited.

'We used to have plagues. Back in the old days. We used to blight the corn. We used to put murrains on the sheep. We used to send puff-adders to lurk in the outside privies. Black mambas, even.

'We used to send the sweating sickness. The sweating sickness caused protracted agonies before a prolonged and painful death. The sweating sickness was wonderful!

'And you know what? I really used to like the Curse of Evil Counsel. Some of the Gods didn't really get it. Bit too subtle for them. Haw, haw.

'Bit too subtle for some of the dogs as well. The dogs never knew what was happening or who was doing it. Used to freak the bleeding dogs right out. Haw, haw, haw.'

Ogbun paused.

It was a moment of fond nostalgia.

'What was your favourite?' inquired Erzulie sweetly.

'Ha ha! My favourite?' chortled Ogbun.

Ogbun wriggled. Ogbun was so excited he nearly dropped his hammer.

'What I really liked was Defeat in Battle and Failure in War!'

Ogbun was panting.

'And what did you particularly like about Defeat in Battle and Failure in War?' Erzulie asked him.

Erzulie was being exquisitely courteous.

Ogbun was so carried away he completely missed the patronising tone.

'Hopeless charges!' cried Ogbun.

Ogbun was nearly shouting.

'Forlorn defences! Broken spearwalls! Chariots immobilised by broken wheels! Hamstrung horses! Sacked towns! Loot! Booty! Enslaved citizens! Violated virgins! Desecrated matrons! Captured herds! Slaughtered flocks! Uprooted orchards! Burned villages! Decapitated kings!

'Haw haw!' cackled Ogbun.

'Those were the days!' Ogbun crowed.

Ogbun's face fell.

'Don't get very much of that sort of thing anymore,' Ogbun said.

Ogbun's tone was rather plaintive.

The Gods momentarily fell silent.

The living rock was energised. The living rock hummed.

At the end of the line Ug struggled.

Beyond Ug the fault in the rock face creaked. The fault ran from top to bottom. The fault was deep.

Erzulie glanced towards the fault. Erzulie heard it creaking. Erzulie could not see the fault properly. Baron Vendredi glanced right as well. Baron Vendredi saw the fault even less well. As the God of bureaucrats one of Baron Vendredi's secondary roles was as patron of short-sightedness.

Erzulie and Baron Vendredi looked at each other. Erzulie and Baron Vendredi said nothing. There was nothing Erzulie and Baron Vendredi could say.

The wind from the steppe whistled across the top of the cliff. The wind whistled quietly. The wind carried the faint cries of the night birds. The wind brought the faint scent of camp fires. From time to time there was the muffled chink of a bridle in the distance.

Erzulie moved. Erzulie wriggled against the rock face. If there had been anyone there to see or any light to see by, it would have looked painful.

'I shall appeal to the Older Gods,' Erzulie announced.

'The Older Gods, ma'am?' Baron Vendredi queried.

Baron Vendredi sounded nervous. It was not a proposal for which there was any precedent in the procedural handbooks.

Erzulie tried to fling out her hands. There were times when Erzulie seemed to think she was a free-standing sculpture.

'The Older Gods!' yelled Erzulie.

Baron Vendredi gasped. Baron Vendredi bowed his head. Baron Vendredi said nothing. From Erzulie's other side there came a stony chuckle.

'What have the Older Gods ever done for us?' demanded Erzulie.

‘When have we ever seen the Older Gods? When have the Older Gods come? When did the Older Gods ever send a message in a dream or the flight of a bird?’

Baron Vendredi wriggled. Baron Vendredi did not seem as uncomfortable as Erzulie. Perhaps Baron Vendredi was more used to chronic discomfort. As the presiding deity of the civil service, one of Baron Vendredi’s secondary functions was as the patron God of haemorrhoids.

‘We shall appeal to them,’ Erzulie announced.

‘We shall invoke their powers. We shall offer them the rituals that the dogs no longer offer us.’

There was clearly something about the perverse symmetry of the proposal that appealed to Erzulie.

‘But....’ said Baron Vendredi.

‘Ma’am. How are the Elder Gods to be worshipped? With what forms? And in what sacred place? Where is the divine entity who can remind us of the rituals? Or tell us, indeed, who are the Elder Gods?’

Erzulie balled her fists. It was something Erzulie could manage quite well as a *bas relief*.

‘We shall march to the top of the cliff!’ Erzulie decreed.

‘We shall march in procession! I shall lead.’

It was difficult to imagine that Erzulie would do anything else.

Baron Vendredi tried to interrupt.

‘But ma’am....’ Baron Vendredi managed.

Erzulie ignored him.

'We shall summon the lesser Gods of the Old City,' Erzulie cried.

'They will abandon the temples and the palaces. They will leap from the rooftops. They will follow us.'

If Baron Vendredi could have freed a hand he would have covered his eyes. But Baron Vendredi was carved from stone.

'We shall assemble on the cliff top,' exulted Erzulie.

'We shall be formed in our ranks and gradations. We shall face the day. We shall salute the sun.'

'Yes,' said Baron Vendredi.

'That's the bit that worries me.'

Erzulie ignored him.

'We shall exploit our divine powers to the full!'

One would have said Erzulie roared the words, if it were not for one's authorial fear of suggesting something somewhat cruder, and perhaps even something more masculine, than female divinity requires.

'I suppose,' conceded Baron Vendredi.

'Not sure I've ever been in post when it's been attempted. Hard to predict the results. Hard to predict anything very much nowadays.'

'I like a good march,' Ogbun chuckled. 'Bit of looting and foraging. Bit of rapine and slaughter on the side. Hee hee! Loads of fun.'

'Ugh,' said Ug. The other Gods ignored him.

20

'When are they leaving?' asked Fastidious Youth.

Shag 'em All shrugged. 'Don't know,' Shag 'em All said.

Shag 'em All sounded thoroughly miserable. Shag 'em All's mouth was slack and her eyelids were drooping. Shag 'em All looked as miserable as she sounded.

Fastidious Youth turned towards her. Fastidious Youth opened his mouth. Fastidious Youth hesitated. Fastidious Youth looked away. Shag 'em All waited.

Fastidious Youth drew breath deeply.

'They are definitely planning to leave?' Fastidious Youth asked Shag 'em All.

What he said had the inflection of a question. In fact Fastidious Youth was asking Shag 'em All to confirm a statement she had already made.

Shag 'em All nodded miserably. Shag 'em All nodded several times.

Fastidious Youth waited. Shag 'em All turned to him.

'They've been talking about it,' Shag 'em All said.

'They've been talking?' asked Fastidious Youth.

Fastidious Youth turned towards Shag 'em All. Fastidious Youth was inviting Shag 'em All to say more.

'Planning?' suggested Shag 'em All.

Fastidious Youth waited.

'Organising,' Shag 'em All conceded.

Shag 'em All's voice was lower. Shag 'em All sounded overtly depressed.

'What are they organising?' Fastidious Youth was gentle.

Shag 'em All sighed. Shag 'em All wrapped her arms round her knees.

'Carts. Mules. Food.'

Shag 'em All looked directly at Fastidious Youth.

'Spears.'

Fastidious Youth nodded several times.

'Do you know what's taking the time?' Fastidious Youth asked.

Shag 'em All shook her head. Shag 'em All's hair brushed the shoulders of her tunic.

Above their heads the Wooden God coughed.

The young people caught each other's eyes. Fastidious Youth tried to suppress a smirk. Shag 'em All covered her face with her hand. Above her hand Shag 'em All rolled her eyes.

The young people composed themselves. The young people looked inward and upward. The movements were fluid and complementary. To a sensitive observer there would have been a suggestion of a certain inner harmony developing.

The young people looked up. The Wooden God looked down. The cat on the Wooden God's shoulder licked her paw. The cat was bored.

'In my experience,' the Wooden God began.

The Wooden God sounded rather portentous.

Fastidious Youth nodded. Fastidious Youth looked encouraging.

Shag 'em All looked nothing at all. It took an effort.

'In my experience it's tactics,' the Wooden God said.

Fastidious Youth lifted his eyebrows.

'Yes,' said the Wooden God.

'Tactics. The longer it takes and the more decisions they have to bring to the Leader of the Free Citizens the more powerful he becomes. Up to a certain point of course.'

The young people looked at each other.

'Who's going?' asked Fastidious Youth.

Fastidious Youth spoke quietly.

Shag 'em All looked at him.

'Are you talking about *bouches inutiles*?' Shag 'em All asked.

Fastidious Youth nodded.

Shag 'em All sighed. Shag 'em All looked away.

'I didn't know you spoke French,' said the Wooden God.

'Most impressive.'

Shag 'em All glanced at him. It was perfunctory. Shag 'em All made a dismissive gesture with one hand.

'In my field clients often require a certain level of sophistication,' Shag 'em All said.

Shag 'em All sounded bored.

Shag 'em All turned back to Fastidious Youth.

'We're going,' Shag 'em All said.

'We?' Fastidious Youth asked.

'Yes,' Shag 'em All said. 'The ladies.'

Fastidious Youth nodded slowly.

'We've got a wagon,' Shag 'em All told him.

Fastidious Youth went on nodding.

Shag 'em All reached out. Shag 'em All brushed Fastidious Youth's hair off his forehead with the palm of her hand. Shag 'em All ran her hand down over the back of Fastidious Youth's head. Shag 'em All loved stroking Fastidious Youth's hair. Stroking people's hair was Shag 'em All's trademark gesture of affection.

Shag 'em All clasped Fastidious Youth round the back of his neck. Shag 'em All looked at Fastidious Youth.

'I want you to come,' Shag 'em All said.

'What?' said Fastidious Youth. 'With the ladies?'

Shag 'em All laughed. Shag 'em All slapped Fastidious Youth's shoulder with the back of her hand.

'No!' Shag 'em All said.

Shag 'em All looked Fastidious Youth straight in the eye. The laughter slipped away from Shag 'em All's face. Shag 'em All's features became completely serious.

'Just come,' Shag 'em All said.

Shag 'em All spoke quietly.

Fastidious Youth looked at the tiles on the roof across the square. You would not have sworn that Fastidious Youth could see them.

Shag 'em All slipped her arm inside Fastidious Youth's elbow. Fastidious Youth took Shag 'em All's hand.

'I would like to,' Fastidious Youth said.

'Then why don't you?' Shag 'em All asked.

Fastidious Youth turned. Fastidious Youth looked at Shag 'em All.

'They will kill me,' Fastidious Youth said.

Fastidious Youth spoke quietly.

Shag 'em All put her other hand on Fastidious Youth's forearm. Shag 'em All nodded. Shag 'em All's hair was a curtain. The curtain swayed.

'You're not like the others,' Shag 'em All said.

'I'm one of them,' Fastidious Youth reminded her.

'You haven't done anything,' Shag 'em All said.

'They've done loads of stuff,' said Fastidious Youth.

'They've been doing it for hundreds of years.'

'Thousands,' said the Wooden God a few feet above their heads.

The young people ignored him.

Shag 'em All brushed the tear from her eye with the back of her hand.

'So what are you going to do?'

'I'm going to go with them,' said Fastidious Youth.

'With...?'

'With my lot.'

Shag 'em All sat bolt upright.

'They are leaving too?'

Shag 'em All was really surprised.

The Wooden God leaned his head over.

'You didn't hear it from us,' said the Wooden God portentously.

The young people ignored the Wooden God.

Shag 'em All flapped the back of her hand in the Wooden God's general direction. Fastidious Youth nodded at Shag 'em All.

'But....' Shag 'em All protested.

'They're going to burn the temples,' Fastidious Youth told her.

Shag 'em All's face jerked forward. Shag 'em All's mouth dropped open.

'And the palaces,' Fastidious Youth said.

Shag 'em All sat up straight.

'They're not coming back,' Shag 'em All said.

Fastidious Youth nodded.

'That's the end,' Shag 'em All said.

Fastidious Youth nodded again.

Above the young people a hollow voice boomed.

'It's the final response to the diminishing returns of complexity,' the Wooden God informed them helpfully.

The Wooden God was like that sometimes.

'There is eventually a loss of legitimacy to which the only response is abandonment and flight.'

Shag 'em All twisted her neck. Shag 'em All looked up at the Wooden God.

'Shut the fuck up,' Shag 'em All said.

The Wooden God looked rather hurt.

Shag 'em All turned back to Fastidious Youth.

'What are you going to do?' Shag 'em All asked him.

Shag 'em All sounded desperate.

'The lowland Maya are in many ways the classic case,' the Wooden God muttered. The Wooden God sounded abstracted.

The cat stopped licking. The cat left her paw suspended in space. The cat looked at the Wooden God.

You would have got the impression the cat thought the Wooden God was mad. You would have been inclined to agree.

The young people didn't listen to the Wooden God.

'I'm going to go,' said Fastidious Youth. 'With them.'

'Of course the lowland Maya are not perhaps the best example,' muttered the Wooden God.

'The collapse of the lowland Maya is still over two thousand years in the future.'

'Where...?' demanded Shag 'em All.

Shag 'em All was choking.

'The Anasazi, though....' said the Wooden God musingly.

The Wooden God's gaze was focused, if focused was the right word, on something invisible above the rooftops and beyond the walls.

'South,' said Fastidious Youth.

'South?' shrieked Shag 'em All.

'Who are of course even further in the future,' said the Wooden God.

'Mm-hmm,' went Fastidious Youth. 'Down the river.'

'But that's....' Shag 'em All couldn't finish.

Fastidious Youth finished for her.

'Open country?' Fastidious Youth asked.

Fastidious Youth wanted to be sure.

Shag 'em All nodded.

Shag 'em All couldn't speak for a moment.

'It's....' Shag 'em All began.

Shag 'em All stopped. Shag 'em All looked helpless.

'Suicidal?' Fastidious Youth suggested.

Fastidious Youth's voice was quiet. Fastidious Youth sounded polite.

'I do so love the cliff-side refugia of the Anasazi,' murmured the Wooden God.

Shag 'em All looked away. Shag 'em All drew back her hand. Shag 'em All leaned forward. Shag 'em All wrapped her arms round her knees.

Fastidious Youth kept his eyes on the back of Shag 'em All's head. You would have thought that Fastidious Youth was seeing the glossy black curls for the first time.

Shag 'em All nodded several times. Shag 'em All stopped nodding. Shag 'em All put her face on her knees. Fastidious Youth waited.

'The refugia say something about human endurance,' said the Wooden God. 'And the persistence of illusion.'

Shag 'em All ignored the Wooden God. Shag 'em All sighed. Shag 'em All lifted her head. Shag 'em All turned her face towards Fastidious Youth.

'You are going to die if you come with us,' Shag 'em All said. 'And you are going to die if you go with them.'

Fastidious Youth nodded. Fastidious Youth nodded several times. Fastidious Youth nodded slowly.

Fastidious Youth inhaled deeply. Fastidious Youth exhaled noisily. Fastidious Youth stared into the distance.

'It's a choice,' Fastidious Youth said.

'A choice between useless self-sacrifice and pointless heroism.'

Fastidious Youth was obviously quite proud of the epigram. Fastidious Youth had clearly been rehearsing it for some time.

Shag 'em All sat up.

'You're so fucking clever,' Shag 'em All said.

She slapped him.

Shag 'em All drew her arm back and swung from the shoulder. Shag 'em All kept her hand open. Her hand landed squarely. The impact was loud.

'Oh!' exclaimed the Wooden God.

The cat grabbed the Wooden God's shoulder with both paws. The cat hung her head over. The cat looked down.

Shag 'em All covered her mouth with her hand. Shag 'em All stared at the vivid red mark as it spread slowly across the cheek of Fastidious Youth.

Fastidious Youth stood. Fastidious Youth looked down at Shag 'em All. Shag 'em All lifted both hands and covered the lower part of her face.

Fastidious Youth reached down. Fastidious Youth took Shag 'em All's wrists.

Fastidious Youth held her wrists gently. Shag 'em All didn't pull away.

Fastidious Youth lifted Shag 'em All's arms. Shag 'em All didn't resist.

Fastidious Youth lifted Shag 'em All's hands as high as his chest.

Shag 'em All stood.

Shag 'em All stood very close to Fastidious Youth. Fastidious Youth didn't let her go. Shag 'em All and Fastidious Youth were looking, as the romantic novelists sometimes say, into each other's eyes.

Fastidious Youth dropped Shag 'em All's hands. Fastidious Youth turned. Fastidious Youth was now facing away from the square and towards the rear of the statue.

Fastidious Youth put one hand against Shag 'em All's back. Fastidious Youth took a step.

Shag 'em All gasped. Shag 'em All turned too. Shag 'em All also took a step.

The young people walked. The young people walked alongside each other. The young people fell into step with each other. The young people fell into step with each other without even thinking or trying.

As they walked Fastidious Youth crossed his body with his left hand.

Fastidious Youth took Shag 'em All's left hand in his.

Fastidious Youth lifted Shag 'em All's left hand. Fastidious Youth raised his right hand. Fastidious Youth kept the back of his right hand upwards.

Fastidious Youth placed Shag 'em All's left hand on top of his own right hand. Fastidious Youth held up Shag 'em All's hand in front of them both.

Shag 'em All was a bride.

Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All turned again. Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All were a procession of two. Fastidious Youth and Shag 'em All disappeared behind the statue.

'Trumpets!' proclaimed the Wooden God.

'Lutanists! Dancing girls!'

The cat turned her back. The cat curled up on the Wooden God's shoulder.

The cat went to sleep.

'I suppose I can be a witness,' the Wooden God said.

The Wooden God sounded rather smug.

A faint voice came from behind the statue. The voice was unmistakably feminine.

'Fuck off,' said the faint, unmistakably feminine voice. 'You stupid fucking git.'

21

Royal Brother, greetings. May my Royal Brother be well. May his heir and chosen successor be well. For I suspect that my Royal Brother's loyal servants are very solicitous about the health of my Royal Brother's heir right now. They will probably be needing an heir quite soon.

What other than a serious and debilitating illness could possibly have caused my Royal Brother to forget his Royal Brother's modest request? My Royal Brother's servants must be worried.

I send staff officers to the mountain tops. I send them on horseback. The staff officers are lazy fuckers who had pampered childhoods. They won't walk anywhere.

I send young officers. The young officers have eyes like hawks. The young officers also have superbly well-toned buttocks. We will leave the matter of the buttocks of the young officers for the moment. Buttocks are potentially quite distracting.

The senior men their forties might make better observers. They have experience. They have judgement. But they do not see like hawks. They can in fact hardly see to find their loincloths in the morning. And one could hardly describe their buttocks as superbly-toned. One is in general somewhat repulsed on aesthetic grounds by their wrinkly middle-aged skin and their sagging middle-aged flesh. And, as you would probably predict, they can barely get it up any more.

My young officers with eyes like hawks scan the desert from their eyries in the mountain tops. Actually, make that eagles. Hawks don't have eyries, do they?

I rather like the idea of eagles. Perhaps I shall raise an élite regiment with an eagle as a standard? Eagles are terribly martial, aren't they? I think that applies in a whole range of cultures. I shall speak to the Master of the Close-Stool on the subject when I have a moment. When I have finished this.

By Erzulie, I have used up half the tablet. My reed is getting worn at the edges and I have not even got to the point. May the Divine Vendredi forgive me!

My young officers see no chariots.

Are the chariots lost? Have the chariots been stolen? Have the drivers of the chariots perished in the wastes? Have the drivers turned traitor and sold the chariots to the whoremongers of Mitanni? Have the wheels of the chariots broken? Did the traces snap?

My brother, a handful of chariots to you is a small thing. To us it is survival.

The Riders disregard the official crossing points. The Riders refuse to register. The Riders bring no documents. The Riders claim to have lost them on the journey. The Riders swarm across the frontiers. The Riders do not stop for our police when requested. The Riders ambush our patrols. The Riders sack our villages. The Riders rape our maidens. The Riders abduct the beautiful adolescent boys with the smooth skins and the superbly-toned buttocks. The Riders drag the beautiful adolescent boys with the smooth skins and the superbly-toned buttocks off to their evil-smelling skin tents. The Riders commit unspeakable practices with the beautiful adolescent boys.

Oddly enough, the Riders appear to share some of their cultural heritage with the ancestors of we Elder Brothers, in the days before we Elder Brothers sedentised

and became a hereditary elite. In the days when the Elder Brothers were still manly nomad war bands and roamed the steppe. The similarities are really quite remarkable. We Elder Brothers might have been better off if we had never got off our horses and founded a civilisation. But enough of that. It is shallow to repine.

I don't think that accidental parallelisms in the heritage really constitute evidence for common descent. I would reject that notion quite firmly. The Riders really are unspeakably primitive. But it is rather odd how given the older Elder Brothers apparently were to unspeakable practices with beautiful adolescent boys. As indeed some of us still very much are.

The Riders! The Riders dismember our tax collectors. The Riders impale our village headmen. The Riders flay our judges. And I don't even want to tell you what they do to the scribes and the priests.

In doing this – and you, Royal Brother, are in a better position to appreciate this than anyone except our two or three other Royal Brothers, may the Divine Erzulie protect them and grant them long reigns – the nomad barbarians are eroding our Royal tax base and our Royal ability to collect revenues. Is it part of a plan? Are the hairy horsemen capable of this kind of sophisticated strategic thinking?

It is only a couple of generations ago that they were opening veins in the necks of their horses to drink the blood and copulating openly with each other at the end of drunken carousals. My scribes and archivists are quite adamant on the point. And do you know what they used to drink in their drunken carousals? Mare's milk. Fermented mare's milk. It is difficult to imagine anything more disgusting. And these people set themselves up for manliness.

Royal revenues can withstand a certain amount of pilfering, evasion and corruption over time. The Royal tax base is resilient. It can recover from alienation and feudalisation. But this is a different matter. This as of course you are aware undermines our ability to keep a complex society in being. There is a critical threshold, isn't there?

Soil erosion. Salinisation. Reduced annual floodwaters. Population flight. Falling tax returns. Declining foreign trade. Resistance to conscription.

It only means one thing, doesn't it?

But of course you know that, don't you? As you know the importance of chariots in combating the Riders, don't you? And the likely effect of the non-arrival of the chariots. You have probably factored all that into your calculations, haven't you?

I think you have definitely been calculating. I think you have been listening to the slimiest and creepiest of your advisers again. I think they have resisted your Royal and noble inclinations, and your manly impulse to help a Royal brother. I think they have been pouring their insidious poisons into your perfectly-formed Royal ear, and disturbing the tranquillity of your Royal dreams. I think they have suggested to you that if the Riders overwhelm our Imperial frontiers and overthrow our Imperial power, my Royal brother will be able to occupy the borderlands that have been in dispute between our great kingdoms for generations and have been in My possession since the great victory of My unnatural son and formerly designated successor, may his evil soul writhe in torment forever.

You are of course aware that it was in this last great battle that my chariot squadrons suffered the catastrophic losses from which they have still not recovered and which expose us to the predations of the hairy unwashed milk-drinking animists from the barren steppe. Barbarians whom in better circumstances we would brush off like a flea, or less than a flea.

In strategy, as my Royal Brother is aware, there is no irony. There is only weakness, and an enhanced probability of defeat.

I am sure you have factored in the ability of your armies to contend with the Riders once Our fortresses and Our garrisons have fallen. But what about the Sea Peoples? Have you considered how you will defend the port cities of your low-lying delta from the pirate clans when your armies are engaged with the horse-riding sodomites in the Marcher country? Eh?

You have betrayed me, my Brother. My cities will fall. It consoles me a little that you have betrayed yourself. Your provinces will be overrun.

May my Royal Brother be well. May his consort and his captains be well.

May his priests, his scribes, his diviners and his astrologers all die in horrible protracted agony from incurable diseases with humiliating and offensive symptoms.

If my Royal Brother does not receive these tablets it is because I have become suspicious of Our messenger and had him thrown off the high cliff as a traitor or impaled as a spy.

Don't bother to reply.

22

The Citizen's Guard took over the gatehouse at the entrance to the bridge. The Citizen's Guard chased away the Night Watch.

There was a clump of Guards on either side of the roadway. The Guards clutched their unfamiliar spears. The Guards held them awkwardly.

The spears were so new and so freshly-trimmed that you could smell the shavings and the sap. The craftsmen had made the shafts from green wood.

Most of the Guards held their spears upright.

Some of the Guards planted the butts of their spears on the packed dirt of the roadway. The Guards grasped the shafts of the spears with one hand. They held the spears a foot or two from their bodies. These Guards were embarrassed to be seen with spears.

Other Guards gripped their spears with both hands. These other Guards held their spears close to their chests. These other Guards embraced their new weapons. These other Guards were bonding with the wooden symbols of their newly-created power.

A few of the Guards held their spears casually across their bodies. When these few Guards turned the spears swung. The points of the spears came too close to their comrades. Their comrades scowled. Their comrades snarled. The insouciant few swung their spears back again. The insouciant few smiled.

Some of the Guards were young. The young Guards had still not got their strength. Other Guards were middle-aged. The middle-aged were paunchy. A few of

the Guards worked on the docks or the buildings. The labourers were muscle-bound. None of the Guards were military.

A Citizen stood by the parapet of the bridge. The Citizen had a dagger in his belt. The Citizen clutched a clay tablet. The Citizen held it close to his face. From time to time the Citizen scrutinised the symbols. Most of the time the Citizen stared at the crowd.

At the Citizen's foot a scribe sat tailor-fashion. The scribe's reed was poised above the wet clay. Behind the Citizen were a couple of thugs. The thugs hefted their clubs. The thugs tapped the clubs in the palms of their hands. The tap of the club was a caress.

The crowd moved across the bridge. The crowd moved slowly. The crowd moved steadily. The people were packed solid.

There were pack mules. There were carts drawn by onagers. There were people on foot.

The people were wearing working clothes. The people carried bundles. The men carried tools and weapons. The women carried bags and baskets.

The people were over-burdened. The people had not even started their journey. The people would discard much of what they were carrying before they had gone very far.

The bridge jammed up. The people squabbled. The thugs lifted their clubs. The Guards straightened their spears. The people moved on.

At the other side of the bridge there were more Guards. The Guards at the other side of the bridge were more aggressive. The Guards at the other side of the

bridge challenged people. The Guards at the other side of the bridge turned the people aside. The Guards at the other side of the bridge made the people open their bundles. The Guards at the other side of the bridge spilled out the contents of the bundles. The Guards at the other side of the bridge dispersed protestors with the butts of their spears.

The people made their way up the Royal Road. The people followed the bends. The people mounted the inclines. The people moved painfully slowly. The people followed the route that the horseman took when he went to his execution.

Some of the people had already reached the top of the cliff. The people must have left at dawn.

The approach to the bridge from the City channelled the people. It funnelled the people. The people came down the hill from the shacks near the citadel. The people came along the river from the merchants' quarter. As the people approached the bridge they slowed down. The people became a crowd.

Shag 'em All waited. Shag 'em All stood across the road from the river bank. Shag 'em All waited at the side of the road with her back to a building. Shag 'em All watched the crowd as it passed.

Fastidious Youth stood further back. Fastidious Youth watched Shag 'em All.

Along the river bank there was a commotion. The crowd was disturbed. The crowd swirled. The crowd eddied. The crowd was a river in flood. There were shrieks. There were angry shouts.

Shag 'em All lifted her head. Shag 'em All shaded her eyes. A smile played round Shag 'em All's lips.

A wagon emerged from the turmoil. The wagon was drawn by a pair of onagers. The onagers were classically bad-tempered. The onagers brayed. The onagers tried to bite.

The wagon had a canvas tilt. The wagon was driven by a large muscular eunuch. Beside the eunuch on the seat sat an unusually handsome pre-pubescent boy.

The eunuch drove the onagers on. The eunuch forced the onagers through the crowd. People cursed him. People shook their fists.

The eunuch smiled. The eunuch smiled with tight lips. The eunuch forbore from using the whip.

As the wagon pressed forward the people it passed glanced up. The people pointed at the rear of the tilt. The people jeered.

From under the canvas women's voices jeered back. Shag 'em All smiled more broadly. The wagon drew level. Shag 'em All could see the Ladies of the Night.

The Ladies were wearing travelling cloaks and scarves. The Ladies clutched bundles. The Ladies held baskets. The Ladies' enveloping clothing did not completely hide the flash of gold at an alabaster throat or round a delicate wrist.

The Ladies saw Shag 'em All. The Ladies shrieked. The Ladies waved. The Ladies beckoned.

Shag 'em All put up her hand. Shag 'em All held it with the fingers spread. Shag 'em All held the palm towards them.

The shrieking subsided. The Ladies started looking worried. The Ladies beckoned Shag 'em All again.

Shag 'em All held her hand flat in front of her. Shag 'em All made a patting motion.

The Ladies were quiet. The Ladies were still. The Ladies stared at Shag 'em All. The Ladies were not completely reassured.

The wagon rolled on. The wagon headed for the bridge. The wagon left Shag 'em All behind.

Shag 'em All stood at the side of the road. Shag 'em All watched the tailgate grow smaller. Under the canvas tilt a row of silent faces looked out.

The Ladies were watching Shag 'em All. Shag 'em All was one of theirs.

Sister's Son moved aside. Sister's Son waited for the wagon to pass. The crowd moved freely in the wagon's wake. Sister's Son moved on again.

Sister's Son saw Fastidious Youth. Sister's Son stopped. Sister's Son smiled. Sister's Son walked up to Fastidious Youth.

Fastidious Youth saw Sister's Son. Fastidious Youth smiled. Fastidious Youth waited.

The young men embraced. The young men talked.

Sister's Son stepped back. Sister's Son held Fastidious Youth's forearms. Sister's Son was moved.

Sister's Son let go. Sister's Son turned. Sister's Son walked towards the bridge.

Fastidious Youth stayed where he was. Fastidious Youth watched Sister's Son go.

The Arch Priestess trailed along the middle of the roadway. The Arch Priestess was alone.

The Arch Priestess dragged her feet. As the Arch Priestess walked she muttered.

‘There will be much work in the fields today,’ the Arch Priestess said.

The hem of the Arch Priestess’s dress was dragging in the dirt. The Arch Priestess’s curls straggled underneath her scarf. The Arch Priestess’s makeup was smeared.

‘The sacks will be heavy,’ the Arch Priestess said.

Shag ‘em All slipped away from the wall. Shag ‘em All slipped through the crowd. Shag ‘em All made placatory gestures. Shag ‘em All murmured apologies.

Shag ‘em All caught up with the Arch Priestess. Shag ‘em All walked by the Arch Priestess’s side.

‘There will be rewards for the diligent,’ the Arch Priestess announced.

‘Mum?’ said Shag ‘em All.

The Arch Priestess glanced at Shag ‘em All. There was no sign of recognition.

‘There will be punishments for the idle,’ the Arch Priestess confirmed.

‘Mum?’ said Shag ‘em All again.

Shag ‘em All sounded less hopeful.

‘There will be celebrations and rejoicing when the harvest is gathered,’ the Arch Priestess declared.

The Arch Priestess did not even look at Shag ‘em All.

Shag’s em All took the Arch Priestess’s hand. Shag ‘em All drew the Arch Priestess’s hand through her arm.

The Arch Priestess took firm hold of Shag 'em All's arm. The Arch Priestess moved close to Shag 'em All.

The women walked side by side. They were both slim. They both had black hair. Both women's hair curled in the same extravagant way.

'There will be much work to be done to prepare the fields,' the Arch Priestess said. 'Much work before the river floods again.'

The crowd flowed along the river bank. The crowd pressed across the bridge. The gardens along the opposite bank of the river were empty. The fields beyond the gardens were abandoned.

The crowd struggled up the Royal Road. The crowd reached the top of the cliff. The crowd disappeared.

Shag 'em All and the Arch Priestess followed the crowd.

Shag 'em All turned. Shag 'em All looked for Fastidious Youth.

Fastidious Youth had gone.

23

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool glanced at the guards. The guards tensed. The movement was just visible.

‘Majesty,’ said the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool.

‘Me?’ asked the Last King.

The Last King sounded startled. The Master of the Lower Vineyard sniggered.

Swiftly the Master of the Lower Vineyard covered his mouth with his hand.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool kept a straight face.

‘I believe your audience is over, majesty,’ the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool said.

‘It is?’ asked the Last King.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool inclined his head. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool was grave.

‘Well,’ said the Last King.

‘In that case.’

The Last King put his hands on the arms of the throne. The Last King pushed himself up.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool looked at the guard. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool nodded.

The guard looked at his comrade. The guard’s comrade nodded.

The Last King stepped away from the throne.

The guard dropped his spear. The spear fell to the side. The spear clattered against the floor.

The guard swirled his cloak with his arm. The cloak wrapped around the Last King's head. The cloak covered the Last King's face.

The Last King put up his hands. The Last King was too late.

The guard grabbed the cloak. The guard pulled the cloak tight. The cloak pinned the Last King's arms.

The guard held him. The guard's comrade stepped forward.

The guard's comrade reversed his spear. The guard's comrade raised the butt. The guard's comrade held the point down.

The Last King protested.

'No!' the Last King said.

'No! What...?'

The guard's comrade stabbed. The guard's comrade stabbed downwards with his spear.

The Last King groaned. It was a groan of despair.

The guard staggered. The guard kept the cloak tight around the king's upper body. The guard struggled to hold the weight.

The guard's comrade wrenched the spear free. The guard staggered backwards.

The blood spurted. The blood spurted through the rents in the cloak. It was arterial blood.

The blood drenched the cloak. The blood covered the Last King's legs below his tunic. The blood covered the bare legs of the guard. The blood spread across the floor. The blood was a pool.

The guard's comrade stabbed again – and again. The guard's comrade might have been out in the barrack yard, practicing stabbing on a dead pig hanging from a rail.

The pool of blood spread across the floor towards the feet of the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool and the Master of the Lower Vineyard. In the open sandals of the Lord of the Greater Close-Stool and the Master of the Lower Vineyard their feet were bare.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool watched. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool was impassive.

The Master of the Lower Vineyard watched. The skin around the eyes of the Master of the Lower Vineyard was tight. The skin below the nostrils of the Master of the Lower Vineyard twitched.

The Master of the Lower Vineyard raised his hand. The guard's comrade stabbed again. The Master of the Lower Vineyard raised his voice.

'Enough!' the Master of the Lower Vineyard said.

The guard's comrade froze. The guard's comrade stared. Then the guard's comrade stepped back. The guard's comrade was shaking.

The guard disentangled himself from the cloak. The guard let the cloak go. From the waist down the guard's tunic and his legs were soaked with blood.

The dead pig dropped. The dead pig fell to the floor. The dead pig thudded.

The guard stepped back. The guard looked at the blood. The guard did not understand how there could be so much blood. The guard wondered where it came

from. Every time the guard saw someone stabbed to death – and he had seen quite a few – he could never quite believe the blood.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool walked slowly to the door. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool walked around the pool of blood. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool looked into the corridor. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool beckoned.

The Master of the Lower Vineyard snarled. The Master of the Lower Vineyard turned away. The Master of the Lower Vineyard clasped his hands behind him. The Master of the Lower Vineyard's eye fell on the Marching God. The Master of the Lower Vineyard froze.

The Master of the Lower Vineyard could have sworn the God was looking at him. The Master of the Lower Vineyard shook his head. The Master of the Lower Vineyard looked away. The Master of the Lower Vineyard looked back at the carnage.

The Little People walked in. The Little People kept their heads down. The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool waved his hand at the corpse.

The Little People looked at the corpse. For a moment The Little People were still. The Little People's faces were devoid of all expression.

The Little People stood around the corpse of the Last King. The Little People picked up the corners of the guardsman's cloak. The Little People wrapped the corners of the cloak round their hands.

The Little People dragged the cloak. The Little People dragged the corpse of the Last King on the cloak. The Little People dragged the corpse of the Last King like a pig on a sled.

The Little People dragged the corpse of the Last King of the Old City out of the Hall of Recitals. The Last King was lying on his back on a torn and blood-soaked cloak.

A woman of the Little People came in. The woman had a bucket. The woman of the Little People began to mop. The woman of the Little People kept her eyes down.

The Lord of the Greater Close-Stool nodded at the guards. The guards left. The guards trailed their spears. The guards hung their heads.

The bald God with the fat belly looked sad. The bald God with the fat belly had nothing to say.

24

Erzulie braced herself. Erzulie spread her fingers against the rock. Erzulie's face twisted up. Erzulie's lips pulled away from her teeth. Erzulie closed her eyes.

'Oh!' Erzulie went.

It was oddly like the sound some people make when passing an unusually hard stool.

There was a tearing sound. Erzulie shuddered. Erzulie fell forward. Erzulie staggered.

Rocks fell from the cliff. The fault yawned loudly. A large boulder bounced passed the Gods. It just missed Ogbun. The boulder bounced several times and rolled into the valley, where it did considerable damage in the suburban gardens and the fields. One rather hopes the farmers and the gardeners were appropriately insured.

If the Gods had any interest in the affairs of men they might have noticed that a sentry on the battlements of the citadel ceased his pacing. The Gods might have noticed that he looked up. The Gods might have noticed that he shielded his eyes and stared. But the Gods hadn't any interest in the affairs of men. So they didn't notice.

Erzulie turned to face Baron Vendredi. As usual Erzulie ignored Ogbun. Erzulie took a couple of paces backwards on the narrow path.

'Oh!' Erzulie gasped.

Erzulie's eyes widened. If Erzulie hadn't been stone you would have sworn she was blushing.

Erzulie put her hands behind her hips. Erzulie twisted her head. Erzulie craned her neck. Erzulie looked over her shoulder. Erzulie tried to look down. Erzulie felt with both hands for the edges of her torn clothing. Erzulie tried to pull the edges together.

Erzulie turned back to Ogbun and the Baron. Erzulie was still wide-eyed.

Erzulie made an effort. Erzulie left the ragged cloth to take care of itself. Erzulie drew herself up. Erzulie raised her arms. Erzulie opened her hands.

'Free yourselves!' Erzulie cried.

'Will you allow yourselves to be shamed by a goddess? Are you immortals? Are you superhuman? Or are you less than dogs?'

Ogbun grumbled. Ogbun put his head down. Ogbun hunched his shoulders. Ogbun gripped his hammer. The rock creaked.

Baron Vendredi coughed. Baron Vendredi lifted his hand to the brim of his anachronistic tall hat. Baron Vendredi started to shake. The rock creaked again.

Erzulie's elbows locked. Erzulie's hands stretched right up. Erzulie's eyes were wild. Erzulie was a witch.

The halves of Erzulie's ruined dress flapped in the breeze. Erzulie was oblivious.

'Empower yourselves!' Erzulie shrieked.

'Do it now - or be enslaved forever!'

The Gods made one last effort. The Gods wrenched themselves away. The living rock shuddered. The cliff swayed. Huge lumps of rock tumbled down. Several narrowly missed the Gods. Boulders bounced down into the valley.

The vultures flew up from their nests. The vultures soared towards the thermals. The vultures croaked. In the racket of tumbling boulders, nobody heard.

The sentry on the citadel walls ducked behind the battlements. It was reflexive. At that height the sentry was not in real danger. That would come later.

Ogbun and Baron Vendredi both took a couple of steps. Ogbun and Baron Vendredi steadied themselves. Ogbun and Baron Vendredi looked towards Erzulie. Ogbun and Baron Vendredi were proud.

Ogbun and Baron Vendredi were like schoolboys. Ogbun and Baron Vendredi were waiting for the headmistress to approve.

Erzulie breathed deeply. Erzulie's shoulders fell. Erzulie put her hands behind her hips again. Erzulie tried not to twist her neck and peer across her shoulder. Erzulie couldn't quite stop herself.

Across the valley from the Gods what was left of the Old City was wide awake. The Little People were shocked.

Boulders had shattered on impact. Lumps of rock had crashed through thatch and destroyed houses. Huge tumbling fragments of cliff had torn through the orchards and brought down the trees. The Little People thought they had woken to the end of the world.

The guards wandered out into the yard of the barracks. The guards struggled into their tunics and tightened their belts. The under-officers marched up the stairways to the battlements.

The few remaining Free Citizens came out of their houses. The Free Citizens signed to their wives to keep the children indoors while they assessed the situation

and checked for damage. The wives were worried. The children were excited.

Grandmothers went to look for stout baskets and large pots.

Guards with spears at the shoulder arms mustered in open spaces. The Guards kept away from roofs and walls. The Guards rattled the butts of their spears on the packed dirt that did duty for a pavement. It seemed to make the Guards feel important.

The Little People climbed up onto rooftops and peered through windows. The Little People were cautious. If there were clear signs of a breakdown of order the Little People were going to run.

In the squats and the ruins and the abandoned houses the escaped slaves, the fugitive debtors and the deserters gathered their weapons and rolled up their blankets. The escaped slaves, the fugitive debtors and the deserters waited. If the escaped slaves, the fugitive debtors and the deserters got a chance, they were going to run as well.

Erzulie waved at Ogbun. Ogbun passed Erzulie. Ogbun joined Baron Vendredi.

Erzulie turned. Erzulie looked across the valley.

Ug stood and waited. Ug said nothing at all.

Gods with martial accoutrements of bows and swords stepped down from their plinths in the courtyards of palaces. Gods with flowing robes exited the temples in the courtyards. Most of the Gods with flowing robes had full breasts. Some of the Gods with flowing robes were transvestites.

Gods climbed over the walls of palaces. Gods shimmied down the walls of the citadel on ropes twisted from the dedicated wall hangings of the sacred inner sancta. Gods shut their eyes and jumped from rooftops.

Erzulie stood tall on the edge of the cliff path with her hands behind her hips. Erzulie was proud. Erzulie watched. Erzulie waited.

The Little People fell on their knees. The few remaining Citizens pushed their children in front of the empty niches where the Gods of the household had stood. Grandmothers told their beads and muttered. Guards fingered amulets. Priests in temples beat cymbals and burned incense. Dogs howled.

In the desert the jackals heard the dogs. The jackals barked in answer.

Gods filled the streets. Gods flooded into the roads. The Night Watch abandoned the Eastern Gate. The Gods surged through.

The Gods swept the solid gates off their hinges. The Gods poured out onto the Eastern Road.

Erzulie watched the disorderly column of Gods as it stormed towards the cliff. Erzulie watched with evident pleasure.

Erzulie turned away. Erzulie waved to Ogbun and Baron Vendredi to precede her along the cliff path. Erzulie was going to put herself at the head of the column. Erzulie was going to lead the march.

Behind Erzulie's back a short fat God scurried through the ruins of the Eastern Gate. The short fat God was panting.

'Wait for me!' the short God wailed. 'Wait for me!'

25

The Wooden God opened his single eye. The Wooden God looked around. The Wooden God looked bewildered. The Wooden God could hear the hubbub of departing Gods on the East Road. The Wooden God had not so far processed the information.

The cat half-opened one eye. It was possibly a gesture of solidarity with the Wooden God.

The cat peered out. The cat looked jaundiced. The cat turned her back on the world and went back to sleep.

Near the gate there was a commotion. The Wooden God peered in the direction of the noise. The Wooden God looked distinctly confused.

The Stone in the Passway got off its little stone pedestal. The Stone in the Passway lifted his stone willy up. The Stone in the Passway held his stone willy with both hands. The Stone in the Passway didn't want to trip.

The Stone in the Passway scuttled through the gateway on his little short legs. The Stone in the Passway was still holding up his stone willy.

The little stone God disappeared. He didn't turn round.

'Could've said goodbye,' said the Wooden God.

The Wooden God's tone was distinctly self-pitying.

'After all we have shared the same rundown location for several millennia. Not that we talked very much.

'Funny little chap. Pleasant enough, but rather limited in some ways. You couldn't really say he had the gift of conversation.'

The cat extended one leg. The cat flexed her claws.

The commotion persisted. Blearily the Wooden God turned his head.

'I could do with a strong cappuccino,' the Wooden God muttered.

The Wooden God thought for a moment.

'What *is* a strong cappuccino?' the Wooden God mused.

The Wooden God focused. The Wooden God's eyes opened. The Wooden God's cheeks tightened.

Over the rooftops and beyond the Eastern arc of the walls of the Old City the Wooden God saw a rabble of Gods in a cloud of dust. The Gods were flooding the road out of the City. The Gods were streaming up the cliff towards the escarpment at the top.

'Blimey,' said the Wooden God. 'That's a bit out of order.'

Ogbun with his hammer and Baron Vendredi in his tall hat led the procession. At this distance Ogbun with his hammer and Baron Vendredi in his tall hat were tiny. Ogbun with his hammer and Baron Vendredi in his tall hat were miniatures.

Erzulie walked behind Ogbun with his hammer and Baron Vendredi in his tall hat clutching the ragged edges of her clothes. Decorum and dignity had to be maintained, especially in the hour of triumph.

Ug followed behind. Ug hung his head. An observer might have surmised that Ug was in fact the God of lowered self-esteem.

The crowd of lesser Gods tramped up the road behind the leaders. The lesser Gods were all shapes and sizes. The lesser Gods jostled each other. Sometimes the lesser Gods came to blows.

The lesser Gods straggled all over the road. At times the press of Gods was so great that one of the smaller lesser Gods fell off the road and tumbled into the ditch. The crowd of lesser Gods marched on.

A platoon of Marching Gods in mountaineer's boots with pointed toes and curved swords over their shoulders brought up the rear. The Marching Gods in the mountaineer's boots with the pointed toes and the curved swords over their shoulders seemed to have taken it upon themselves to act as marshals. The Marching Gods in the mountaineer's boots with the pointed toes and the curved swords over their shoulders were being rather officious.

The little fat God trailed behind. The little fat God was out of breath. Every time the little fat God tried to wail he was overcome by a fit of coughing.

'In something between two and three millennia there will evolve in at least one major Indo-European language a metaphor relating the precipitate departure of rodents to the diminishing seaworthiness of ocean-going vessels,' observed the Wooden God.

'It would have been quite relevant in the current circumstances. But this lot haven't even discovered the deep ocean yet, let alone square-rigged sails. So no sea-faring rats. And no apt locution.'

The Wooden God fell silent. The Wooden God may have been searching his memory, such as it was, for a culturally and historically more appropriate metaphor. If so he failed.

'Oh well,' said the Wooden God.

'Let's do it.'

The Wooden God planted the butt of his staff firmly on the packed dirt of the square. With his free hand the Wooden God lifted his hat in a gesture that was not entirely devoid of a suggestion of something gallant.

The little cat hopped up. The cat draped herself over the hole in the Wooden God's head.

The Wooden God replaced the hat. The cat mewed.

The Wooden God put his weight on his staff. The Wooden God screwed up his eyes. The Wooden God pressed his lips together. The Wooden God bent his knee. There was a creaking sound.

The Wooden God leaned his torso forward. The Wooden God pulled up his foot. The Wooden God's lips parted. Nothing happened.

'Oh!' grunted the Wooden God.

The Wooden God was clearly frustrated. The Wooden God went on pulling.

There was a tearing sound. The Wooden God's foot came away. The Wooden God staggered. The Wooden God hung on to his staff.

'Oh!' went the Wooden God. The Wooden God was clearly taken aback.

The Wooden God pulled up his other foot. Again there came the tearing sound. It was easier this time.

'Oh!' exclaimed the Wooden God.

The Wooden God was quite delighted.

The Wooden God lifted his shoulders. The Wooden God dropped them again.

The Wooden God looked quite coy. The Wooden God grinned. The Wooden God looked around.

The Wooden God shifted the butt of his staff to the front of the plinth. The Wooden God leaned on it. The Wooden God looked down. The Wooden God's face twisted up. The Wooden God was concentrating quite ferociously.

The Wooden God lifted his foot. The Wooden God moved his foot out over the pressed dirt of the square. The Wooden God put his foot down.

The Wooden God lurched. The Wooden God hung on to his staff to prevent himself toppling.

The Wooden God balanced for a moment. The Wooden God was a clumsy dancer. The Wooden God moved his other foot.

The Wooden God was off the plinth where he had stood for millennia. The Wooden God was standing on the bare earth of the square.

'I say!' The Wooden God said. Underneath the hat the cat meowed. The cat sounded quite pissed off.

The Wooden God looked around again. The Wooden God seemed quite furtive.

To the Wooden God's right in the distance there was a hubbub. The Wooden God looked up.

On the cliff top the head of the column of Gods was nearing the edge. Erzulie was striding ahead. Ogbun and Baron Vendredi were just in front of her.

Ug was just behind. Ug looked – in so far as a featureless, unfinished God can be said to look anything at all – rather lost.

‘Oh!’ said the Wooden God.

‘Well,’ the Wooden God added.

‘In that case,’ The Wooden God remarked.

The Wooden God took hold of the brim of his hat. The Wooden God gave it a tug. The little cat popped her head out.

The Wooden God stepped off. The Wooden God was heading towards the gate. The little cat rather hurriedly pulled her head back in.

The Gods were massing on the edge of the cliff. The Gods were ten or twelve deep.

In the Old City the remaining guards and a few Citizens were looking up. The Citizens’ wives covered their mouths with their hands. The children were clinging to their mothers’ skirts. The children’s grandmothers were telling their beads.

The City was too far away from the cliff top for even the Gods to see that the mouths of the Citizens were open in fear and their eyes were wide with alarm. The Little People peered furtively through the chinks in the doors of the abandoned warehouses.

The Marching Gods were marshalling the crowd. The Marching Gods wanted the ranks as close as possible. The Marching Gods wanted the Gods standing shoulder to shoulder. The Marching Gods wanted them close to the edge.

It was all quite obsessional. There was very little obvious point to it.

Below the edge of the cliff the fault groaned. The rocks ground together. The rocks pulled apart.

26

Erzulie stood in the front rank of the Gods on the edge of the cliff. Erzulie was clearly excited. Erzulie stood with her feet side by side, her back straight, her chin raised and her fists balled by her sides.

Erzulie looked glad. Erzulie was no longer holding the torn edges of her clothing. Erzulie had clearly forgotten for the moment that her exquisitely chiselled underwear might be exposed to view.

Ogbun and Baron Vendredi were excited as well. Ogbun was hefting his hammer like a hooligan looking for a fight. On a celestial level, that is more or less what Ogbun was.

Baron Vendredi patted his jacket where his pockets were. Baron Vendredi put his hand inside his breast pocket. Baron Vendredi took his hand out. Baron Vendredi slipped his hand inside his jacket. Baron Vendredi brought his hand out empty. Baron Vendredi stuffed both hands into his trouser pockets. Baron Vendredi pushed his hands deep. Then Baron Vendredi started the sequence again.

The Gods were pushing. The Gods were shoving. The Gods were crowding up to the edge of the cliff.

The Marching Gods had formed an extended line. The Marching Gods were a cordon across the back of the crowd. The Marching Gods stopped any of the Gods falling back.

The Marching Gods pressed up close. The Marching Gods pressed the Gods forward.

The Gods shuffled. The Gods muttered. The Gods jostled each other. The Gods kept pressing closer to the edge. The Gods all wanted to be in the first rank.

Gods are like that. The Gods all wanted to see.

Never in the unbounded aeons of time recorded in the celestial chronicles had so many Gods been assembled in such a small space for a purpose so completely obscure.

Down below in the Old City the watchers on the roofs and the battlements craned their necks. The watchers on the roofs and the battlements could see something was going on. The watchers on the roofs and the battlements couldn't see what.

The Wooden God strode along by the river quays. With every step the Wooden God stuck the butt of his staff against the dirt of the roadway. It was a rather theatrical gesture.

Most of the time the Wooden God kept his head down. The brim of the hat shaded the Wooden God's face.

Sometimes the Wooden God looked up. The Wooden God glanced at the Gods on the cliff top.

'They're standing too close,' the Wooden God muttered.

'They're a perfect target. No good will come of it. You mark my words.

'I'm getting out of here. While I still can.'

Erzulie lifted her face. Erzulie would have turned it to the sun but as she was facing west and it was early morning that would have been quite difficult. As a substitute Erzulie elevated her face in the general direction of the upper atmosphere.

Erzulie put one foot forward. Erzulie bent her knee slightly. Erzulie flung up her hands.

'Oh!' gasped Erzulie.

Erzulie twisted her neck. Erzulie tried to look over her shoulder.

Erzulie dropped her hands. Erzulie clasped her bottom.

The Gods pressed forward. In the crush the front ranks of the Gods teetered on the edge of the cliff. The front ranks of the Gods tried to turn round. The front ranks of the Gods tried to push back.

The Gods behind kept pressing forward.

The fault groaned. The rocks ground together. The rocks pulled apart. The cliff trembled. The cliff top shook.

The watchers in the Old City in the valley below looked up. The watchers in the Old City in the valley below stopped what they were doing.

The Gods on the cliff top pressed together. The Gods in the front rank teetered on the brink. The Gods in the front rank squealed and yelled in protest.

The cliff top rose. The cliff swayed forward. The Gods swayed. The Gods struggled to stay upright.

Erzulie looked around her. Erzulie's mouth was open. Erzulie's eyes were round.

Ogbun and Baron Vendredi both grabbed Erzulie by the arms.

The groaning became a roar. The cliff slipped. The bottom of the cliff slid forward.

The Gods tumbled. The Gods yelled. The Gods screamed.

The rock slide gained momentum. The Gods were inaudible. The roar was deafening.

Erzulie screamed. No-one heard. Erzulie fell.

Ogbun and Baron Vendredi tried to hold her up. Ogbun and Baron Vendredi fell too. Ug watched Ogbun and Baron Vendredi go.

The Gods were swept away in a torrent of rock. The Gods went head over heels. The Gods rolled towards the valley in a cascade of tumbling boulders.

The cliff broke up. Huge fragments of rock poured down into the valley. As the fragments of rock fell they roared.

Ug stepped off. Ug disappeared. Ug became another rock in the cascade. Ug was really lost.

The Gods were pounded. The Gods were smashed to pieces.

An avalanche of rock swept across the fields. The rocks buried the fields several metres deep.

A short fat God teetered on the edge of what had once been the cliff. The short fat God swung his arms. The short fat God flexed his knees.

'Wait for me!' the short fat God yelled.

The short fat God jumped.

The short fat God bounced. He bounced all the way down. The results were entirely predictable.

No vultures rose from the nests on the cliff-top before the cliff fell. The vultures, rather prudently one feels, had already migrated.

On the walls and roofs of the Old City some of the watchers were frozen in terror. There was no-one to pray to any more. The Gods were gone.

Some of the watchers ran. The watchers called to their children and their children's grandparents. The watchers didn't wait. The watchers couldn't outrun the avalanche.

The wave of rock swept into the ancient circuit wall of the Old City. The wall fell. The rocks smashed into the houses. The roofs collapsed. The people who hadn't run were buried. The people who hadn't run were sealed for the next three millennia for the benefit of archaeologists. It is a prospect that one feels is unlikely to have comforted the people who hadn't run in the last few precious moments of their earthly existence.

The avalanche slowed. The avalanche reached the bottom of the walls of the ancient citadel.

A huge cloud of dust rose over the Old City. The rocks groaned. The rocks settled slowly.

The cliff had disappeared. Half the Old City had disappeared. The Gods had disappeared. The valley floor had become a rock plain.

The citadel no longer dominated the surrounding countryside. The citadel was on a level with the river plain.

It would be easy now for an enemy to bring up ladders. With care, and perhaps by using earthen ramps or corduroy roads, the enemy could bring up siege towers and catapults as well.

The citadel had lost what tactical advantage it had ever had. The Old City was over. It was done.

The dust settled. By the river bank a tall figure emerged from the cloud. The tall figure coughed. The tall figure sneezed. The tall figure lifted the broad-brimmed hat he was wearing hat. The head of a thin bony cat shot up.

The Wooden God beat the dust off his robe with the brim of his hat. The little cat dug in her claws. The Wooden God didn't seem to mind.

The Wooden God put his hat back. The Wooden God held the hat by the crown and settled it comfortably.

The Wooden God looked up. The Wooden God wrinkled his eyes. The Wooden God peered through the dust.

The Wooden God stared at the empty place in the sky where the cliff had once been. The Wooden God sighed.

'Couldn't justify the ways of that fucking lot to anyone,' the Wooden God said.

The Wooden God's contempt was palpable.

27

The Guards were drawn up in the courtyard. The Guards stood in ranks. The Guards were silent. The Guards were still.

The Guards watched the goings-on outside the palace. The Guards were expressionless.

The under-officers stood behind the formed platoons. The under-officers were burly men with the scars of long service.

The officers stood in front. The officers were young.

The officers were languid. The officers were bored. The officers were the younger sons of the Elder Brothers.

There was a line of four-wheeled carts between the ranks of the Guards and the palace. The Little People rushed to load them. Under the eye of the overseers the Little People ran out of the stores with sacks and wineskins. The Little People struggled to back the onagers between the shafts.

In front of the Guards the charioteers were drawn up. The charioteers were the elite of the fighting forces of the Blessed Land. It was a shame that the commanders of the charioteers had so far come up with no answer to the anti-chariot tactics of the Riders.

The crews of the chariots held private conversations. The crews of the chariots spoke quietly. The horses in the traces stamped. The horses tossed their manes.

Officials hurried up and down the steps of the palace. The wives of the Elder Brothers sat in the wagons. The hair of the wives of the Elder Brothers was hidden by the hoods of their travelling cloaks.

The women shrieked at their children. The women gestured at the children to get in the wagons. The children ignored their mothers. The children shrieked at each other. The children chased each other round the wagons. The children thought this was a huge adventure.

The officials carried bundles in their arms. The bundles were swathed in sacking and secured with twine. The bundles were clearly heavy. The officials handed them to the Little People with great care. The officials watched the Little People anxiously. The Little People stowed the bundles in the carts.

Above the roof of the palace a thin plume of smoke rose slowly. The Guards looked up. The Guards tensed. The points of the Guards' spears wavered above the ranks.

The senior under-officer stepped forward.

'Steady,' the senior under-officer commanded.

The senior under-officer didn't need to shout.

The charioteers stopped their conversations. The officers in front of the platoons straightened up.

The flames took hold. The smoke billowed. Tiles crashed. A roof beam splintered and fell.

The officials froze. The officials watched the soldiers. The wives of the Elder Brothers stopped shrieking.

The chariots wheeled into line. Good Looks the Playboy took the lead. The charioteers walked their horses towards the citadel gate.

The officers turned about. The officers faced the Guards. The officers stood straight. The officers composed their features in serious expressions.

The officials chivvied the Little People. The nursemaids grabbed the children. The nursemaids lifted the children bodily into the carts. The drivers jumped up behind the onagers. The drivers flexed the reins. The drivers flicked their whips.

The Lord of the Greater Close-stool and the Master of the Lower Vineyard emerged from the doorway at the top of the steps. The Lord of the Greater Close-stool and the Master of the Lower Vineyard stood for a moment. The Lord of the Greater Close-stool and the Master of the Lower Vineyard let their presence take effect. The officials looked up.

The Lord of the Greater Close-stool waited. The Lord of the Greater Close-stool made sure he had the attention of the officials. Then the Lord of the Greater Close-stool swept his arm away from his body.

The drivers cracked their whips. The line of carts rumbled forwards. The onagers tried to bite each other. The onagers kicked.

Fastidious Youth fell in with a little group of officials. The little group of officials followed the carts. Fastidious Youth went with them.

Flames burst through the windows above the doorway. Hastily and with some loss of dignity the Lord of the Greater Close-stool and the Master of the Lower Vineyard proceeded down the steps. The under-officers watched anxiously. The under-officers watched the flames. The under-officers waited for a sign.

The Lord of the Greater Close-stool and the Master of the Lower Vineyard followed the wagons. The Master of the Lower Vineyard turned. The Master of the

Lower Vineyard waved at the officers. The under-officers shouted commands. The Guards moved off.

The chariots and the carts rumbled through the narrow streets of the Old City. The spearmen in the chariots had their shields across their bodies. The archers watched the rooftops. The archers had arrows nocked. The wives of the Elder Brothers held their children close.

The Guards tramped behind the wagons. The Guards swore about the horse droppings in the roadway. It was nothing to them really. The Guards just liked to complain.

The Guards marched past empty homes and abandoned warehouses. Above the heads of the Guards the formed ranks of spear points marched past the shuttered windows.

The crackling of the flames was audible. The fires were taking hold. Flakes of ash drifted down. The flakes fell like black and sinister snow. The flakes fell under the sandals of the soldiers. The flakes fell on the bundles in the wagons.

The smoke stung the children's eyes. The little ones started to cry. The bigger children clung to their mothers. The mothers looked anxiously about. The mothers tried to hold back their tears.

The fires licked around the altars in the temples. The gold and the jewels had been taken. The gold and jewels had been wrapped in sacking and secured with twine and loaded in the wagons by the Little People under the watchful eyes of the priests.

The smoke eddied and swirled in the courtyards outside the sanctuaries. When the smoke was thick it veiled the plinths where the images of the Gods had once stood. You would have sworn that the Gods were still there.

The Little People went back into their barracks. The Little People came out with bundles. The Little People had wrapped a few possessions in a bit of bedding and tied the ends. The Little People held the bundles over their shoulders. The bundles were not heavy.

The Little People looked around. The Little People were cautious. Caution was a settled habit. The Little People were looking for the priests. The priests had gone.

The Little People climbed up onto the roofs of the warehouses. The Little People looked towards the river. The line of sight was obscured by clouds of smoke.

The Little People could hear the onagers and the horses. The Little People could hear the wheels. The Little People could hear the nailed sandals of the Guards. The Guards were tramping in lockstep. When the smoke cleared The Little People could sometimes see the spear points march in ranks between the houses.

The Little People dragged barrels and boxes from the warehouses. The Little People piled them against the inside of the temple wall. The Little People climbed up. On the top of the wall the Little People put their bundles down. The Little People let each other down with ropes.

The Little People approached the gates of the temples. The gates had been left unbarred. The Little People slipped out.

The Little People left the palaces. The Little People did not look happy. The Little People slipped into the City. The Little People looked for warehouses and abandoned storerooms upwind from the fires. The Little People needed somewhere to hide.

One scribe remained in the archives. The scribe hid among the racks and shelves of tablets. The scribe could not bear to leave.

The archives were under the palace. The stay-behind scribe could hear the fires. The stay-behind scribe could smell the smoke. The smoke did not penetrate.

There were empty shelves. The tablets from the current archives had been taken. The tablets from the current archives had been wrapped in sacking and secured with twine. The Little People had stacked the tablets carefully in the wagons.

Only the scribe remained. Above the scribe's head the flames crackled and the smoke rose. They were like the fires of sacrifice.

There were no offerings. There were no Gods. There was nothing to pray to any more.

28

In the morning the Little People straggled out of the Old City. The Little People left by the Land Gate.

The Old City was still burning. A thick column of black smoke mounted from the palace. A thin plume of white smoke drifted upwards from the temple.

The Little People strolled along the towpath on top of the levée. The Little People left in ones and twos. The Little People walked in small groups. Their clothes of the Little People were ragged and threadbare.

The Little People glanced up at the ruined temples and the smouldering palaces. The Little People stared at the breaches in the walls.

The Little People stared at the piles of rock. The Little People stared at the rubble. The Little People said nothing.

The women carried baskets of food. The women had rolled blankets over their shoulders. The women could have been leaving the city to celebrate a rustic festival.

The men carried mattocks and spades. It looked like work.

The men could have been going to turn the soil in the fields ready for the planting. The men could have been going to clear the silt and the weeds from the bottom of the canals.

The faces of the women were scabby. The children were sallow. The shoulders of the men were hunched.

The women tried to stop the children from running down the bank of the levee. The women tried to stop them chasing the wild ducks. The ducks were swimming in the marshes.

The men just threw stones. The stones scared the ducks away.

The groups became larger. The groups exited the Land Gate more frequently. The groups became a crowd. The crowd became thicker. Before long a complete army of the Little People was marching easily along the levée in a narrow unbroken column.

The Land Gate was standing open. One of the pillars of the Land Gate had cracked from top to bottom. The hinges had come away. The massive door hung at angle.

The Guards had disappeared. The Guards might have left with the Elder Brothers. The Guards might have run. The Guards might have been murdered.

There was no-one to close the Land Gate any more. The Little People kept coming.

There were small groups of young men. The young men kept together. The young men moved fast. When the young men could not slip between the families or past the adult males they pushed their way through.

The mothers shrieked and clutched their children to them. The old women cursed. The adult men shouted, in querulous tones of command. The young men ignored them.

Some of the young men carried sticks, trimmed to a point and hardened in the fire. Other young men had clubs. The clubs had long nails hammered through the

heads. A few of the young men had daggers. The young men had stolen the daggers from the corpses of the guards.

The young men pushed to the head of the column. The young men broke into a trot. The young men raised their clubs and their stabbing sticks to shoulder height. The young men scanned the ground ahead.

The height of the levée above the land gave the young men an advantage. The land was broken by field walls and marshes. The fields were close with date palms and groves of apple and pear.

The young men had to keep to the levée. The young men could not fan out. The young men could not spread across the country.

The young men drew steadily ahead of the marching column. The young men spread out in little groups along the levée. Each little group kept together.

The young men were looking for something.

Some of the adult males raised their heads. Some of the adult males screwed up their eyes. Some of the adult males stared into the distance.

Some of the adult males tried to keep the young men in sight. The leading groups of young men were far along the levée. The young men were almost too far away to see.

The women looked at the men. The women were worried. The women called their children close.

Something had happened up ahead. Right down the levee the keener sighted and the more alert of the older men could see a cluster of young men at the foot of a clump of palms. Other groups of young men were catching up and stopping.

Some of the older men quickened their pace. The older men pushed ahead. The mothers of the children were anxious.

Soon there was a compact body of older men out in front of the walking column. The young men saw the older men coming. The young men broke up into groups again and ran on.

The last group of young men had broken off a branch and stuck it in the ground. The branch was a marker. The young men were waving and pointing. The young men wanted the older men to realise there was something there.

Several of the older men raised their hands. It was a gesture of acknowledgement. The young men waved back. Then the young men too ran on.

The sun rose over the marshes and the water-logged fields. The sun cast long shadows from the palms across the water. The sun sparkled in the water. The sun picked out flecks of sand in the desert. The flecks of sand in the desert were abandoned jewels.

The sun scorched the land.

The Little People on the levée settled down to a steady pace. The Little People knew the sun.

The women lifted their scarves. The women pulled the scarves down across their foreheads. The women wrapped the scarves across their mouths.

The women told their daughters to cover themselves. Their daughters pouted and flounced. The old women muttered through bare gums.

The more timid of the older men moved closer to their wives and looked sternly at their children. The children didn't care.

The timid men inflated their chests impressively as they marched beside their children. The timid men balled their fists as they walked.

Up ahead the leaders of the older men had stopped walking. The leaders of the older men were standing on the towpath in a crowd. The leaders of the older men were facing inwards towards the base of the palms.

The older men were looking at something. The older men were hanging back. The older men were silent.

Half a dozen of the older men had moved out in front of crowd. The half -dozen older men were standing near the palms. None of the half -dozen older men was talking. One of the half-dozen older men was squatting on his heels beside the tree.

Lying with her back against the trunk of a palm was the body of a woman. The woman was naked. The men who had killed her had left the woman nothing.

The woman's skin was cut and bruised. The men who had killed her had beaten the woman before she died.

There was dried blood smeared on the woman's face and across the woman's belly. The woman's skin was already discoloured. The woman had probably died the day before.

The squatting man reached down and lifted the woman's hand. The squatting man turned the woman's hand over. The squatting man rubbed the tips of the woman's fingers with his thumb.

The squatting man held the woman's hand in his for a moment. Then the squatting man gently placed the woman's hand on her breast and left it there.

The squatting man turned to his friends. The squatting man looked at them. The squatting man didn't speak. One or two of his friends nodded. Some of his other friends sighed.

The dead woman's fingers were calloused. The dead woman had spent her life plying the shuttle.

The man who was squatting turned back. The man who was squatting reached out one hand to the woman's knee.

The man who was squatting took the woman's knee on either side between his finger and his thumb and palpated. Then gently the man who was squatting shook her lifeless limb.

The man who was squatting sat back on his heels. The man who was squatting wrapped his arms round his shins. The man who was squatting started to rock. The man who was squatting did not look round.

Some of the man who was squatting's friends turned away. One of the man who was squatting's friends muttered. One of the friends of the man who was squatting hissed out his breath through his teeth.

The woman was arthritic. The woman had spent her life kneeling at the loom.

The woman was a temple slave. The woman was one of theirs.

The crowd on the towpath was talking. The crowd was getting excited. The crowd was babbling loud enough to disturb the peace of the Gods.

The men near the palm tree shouted at them. The crowd exchanged angry words with the men near the palm tree. A couple of men from the crowd shambled over, trailing spades.

Shamefaced, the rest of the crowd turned. The crowd shuffled off along the levée.

The head of the column was approaching the palm tree. The people at the head of the column saw a couple of men with spades pick their way down the levée, and disappear from view below the bank.

The people at the head of the column saw four men pick up the woman by her long limbs. The men had nothing to cover her with.

The men got her down the side of the levée. It was awkward. The men carried her as if she was made of glass.

The column came up. Some people broke ranks. The people who broke ranks stood by the side of the towpath and watched.

The men who carried her laid the woman under an apple tree. The men straightened her limbs.

The men with the spades were digging steadily. The men with the spades were used to digging. Digging was what they did.

Some of the children stared. The children's faces were expressionless. The children had seen this too often. The children didn't feel it any more.

Some of the other children turned away. The other children jiggled up and down.

The other children hid their faces in their mothers' skirts and whimpered. The other children had seen this too often. These children felt too much.

The men watching over the body looked up. The men watching over the body waved the people on.

Reluctantly, the people turned away. The people rejoined the march.

The Little People moved on. The sun climbed higher. The dust rose around their feet. The Little People found more bodies.

As the day wore on the bodies became frequent. The Little People found burned out carts. The Little People found packs that had been slashed open.

There were horses with arrows in their throats. There were donkeys with their hamstrings slashed.

There were a few bodies floating in the river. The men would stand at the bank and argue. The men would look for a rope. If the men found a rope someone would swim.

Some of the bodies were lying on the towpath. Some of the bodies had rolled down the bank. Other the bodies had been killed in the fields. One or two of the bodies had got as far as the marshes before they died.

Every time the people found a body they stopped. There was a discussion.

A small group would peel away. The small group would arrange the body. Sometimes one of the marchers would spare a blanket. It was never clear why a particular corpse was chosen to be honoured in this way.

By noon the shadow of the palm fronds was a thick black circle round the base of the trunks. The people were finding bodies often. The column didn't halt any more.

Some of the younger women left the march to help with the burials. Some of the older children fetched things and carried them.

The people were finding adult men now, as well as women. The people were finding children. The people were seeing slash and stab wounds on the bodies. The people were seeing burns. Some of the skulls of the bodies had been crushed.

Sometimes when they reached the bodies the young women would fall to the ground and vomit. The men would make the young women wash their faces in the irrigation ditches. Then the young women would carry on.

Some of the bodies had smooth skins, and fat on their bones. The hands of the young women with smooth skins and fat on their bones were soft. They were not the women of the People.

The Little People buried them anyway.

Sometimes the People identified a Rider, from his long hair and tattoos. The Elder Brothers had fought back.

There was always an argument when they found a Rider. The People usually ended up throwing the Rider in the river.

The column was strung out along the levée. Little groups were scattered across the marshes and the fields. The little groups were busy with spades and corpses.

Far behind the column the impromptu burial parties had finished their work. They trudged along the levée. The burial parties didn't try to catch up.

The families at the head of the column could see the adult men out in front trudging along near the bend in the river. The families couldn't see the young men any more. The families assumed the adult men knew where the young men were.

The shadows of the palm trees fell across the fields and the marshes. Night birds were calling in the pasture and the trees. In the desert a hyena barked.

The Little People lifted their heads in the evening air. The Little People stepped out more briskly.

The mothers lied to their children, as mothers usually do. The mothers told the children that they were nearly there.

The head of the column disappeared around the bend. The marchers heard a sound like a wind in a giant bed of reeds. The sound was the people sighing.

Women screamed.

The head of the column was frozen on the towpath. The Little People were staring at the pasture below the levée.

The Elder Brothers had made camp. The Elder Brothers had been caught in the open. The Elder Brothers had all been killed. The pasture was covered with burned tents and slaughtered people.

There was no room on the towpath. The column backed up. The Little People didn't stop coming. The people lined the levée as far as the next bend.

People were pushed to the edge of the levée. The people picked their way down. The women carried the little ones. The men helped the older children.

The people scrambled through the irrigation ditches. The people dragged their feet through the mud of the fields.

The people gazed in silence on the House of the Dead.

The adult men were in the remains of the camp. Some of the adult men were standing and staring. Some of the other adult men wandered around. The adult men picked things up and looked at them. Then the adult men threw them away.

There were bodies everywhere.

Dead men. Dead animals. Dead women. Dead children.

The Riders had tied Good Looks the Playboy between two saplings. The Riders had bent the saplings over. Then the Riders had let the saplings go. Good Looks the Playboy had been torn in half.

Fastidious Youth was pinned to the side of a broken, burned-out wagon by a javelin. The Riders had nailed his wrists to the boards with daggers.

Fastidious Youth's face was twisted and his head hung. In death, the muscles of Fastidious Youth's shoulders were still knotted.

Fastidious Youth had died slowly.

There was no scabbard on Fastidious Youth's belt. There were no bracers on Fastidious Youth's wrists. Fastidious Youth had been unarmed.

Shag 'em All would never learn that Fastidious Youth had died. Shag 'em All would never be able to grieve.

The young men were spread out beyond the camp. Some of the young men were searching the tall grass and the watercourses. Some of the other young men were standing in small groups. The young men watched the mountains. One or two of the young men climbed trees.

The sun went down. Night came. The world was a world of death.

29

The Citizens stood in formed ranks. The Citizens were a pack.

The Citizens stayed far enough away from the village to be out of range of missiles. The Citizens held their spears upright.

The first rank knelt. The first rank planted the butts of their spears in the dirt and pressed the shafts against their sides with their arms. The first rank of Citizens were a defence against chariots who would never come.

The second rank of Citizens lowered their spears between the heads of the first rank. The Citizens looked intimidating.

In the waning sun the thorn hedge round the village was black. The thorn hedge was thick. The thorns were an inch long. The thorns were as sharp as razors.

The thorn hedge would lacerate your hands before you got a grip. The thorn hedge would slice open your belly if you tried to climb across.

The Citizens could see the thatch of one or two of the houses above the hedge. Some of the Citizens screwed up their eyes. The Citizens thought they could see the heads of the watchers through the thorns.

The Citizens wondered how far the watchers' bows could shoot. The Citizens wondered if the villagers poisoned the tips of their arrows.

The Citizens were city folk, by definition. They thought all village people were savages.

The Citizens did not wonder what the hedgehog of their spears must look like from beyond the fence. The Citizens were not imaginative men.

The older women hung back. The older women kept close to the wagons. The older men were on guard. The children shrieked and ran around.

The unmarried women and the adolescent girls were foraging for firewood. The lower slopes had already been stripped bare. Goats couldn't have done more damage.

Adolescent boys with sharpened sticks and clubs ranged beyond the girls. If the girls went too far the boys bantered with them. If the banter went too far the girls answered back. The girls became quite aggressive.

The sun declined. The blue of the sky thickened. The girls turned back. Behind them the boys loped. The boys were like the juveniles on the flanks of a primate band.

The children got too close to the hedgehog of spears. The older men turned. They waved them away.

A little apart the First Citizen spoke to his council. The faces of the council were browner than when they left the Old City. The council were leaner. The clothes of the members of the council were worn.

Sister's Son stood in the circle. Sister's Son stood upright. Sister's Son stared at First Citizen.

A few of First Citizen's thugs stood off to one side. The thugs had daggers stuck in their belts. The thugs dangled clubs.

'We asked them for water,' First Citizen told his council.

'We offered to pay.'

Some of the councillors shuffled their feet. The First Citizen ignored them.

'They have built their fence around the spring,' the First Citizen continued.

'The spring is the bounty of nature,' the First Citizen elaborated.

'The spring was given to us all.'

The First Citizen's voice had a note of hysteria.

'These people take their animals inside the fence at night. They let them drink.'

There was an undertone of disgust in the First Citizen's voice. Several of the councillors shook their heads.

'Are we less than the animals?' First Citizen demanded.

'Are we dogs?'

The First Citizen paused for effect.

The councillors knew that the First Citizen did not expect a reply. The councillors knew him well by now.

'We asked to purchase supplies. We offered to make a market outside the hedge. We have valuables. We can trade.'

The First Citizen paused. The First Citizen appeared to be thinking. There is a sense in which that may in fact have really been the case.

'They said we are too many. They said we should send a few. To act on our behalf.'

The First Citizen looked up. The First Citizen looked round the circle. The First Citizen's councillors looked down.

'Send them into ambush?' the First Citizen demanded.

The First Citizen was angry now.

'Send them to die?'

The First Citizen looked around his council. The First Citizen's councillors met his eye. The First Citizen's councillors would not dare to contradict him.

'These people think we are fools,' the First Citizen said.

'They think we are stupid.'

The First Citizen's councillors murmured. The First Citizen's councillors nodded.

'We escaped from the City,' the First Citizen announced.

The First Citizen's councillors looked up.

'We fought our way out.'

One or two of the First Citizen's councillors started. The councillors looked at the First Citizen. The First Citizen ignored them.

'We have to protect our women and our children,' the First Citizen reminded them.

The First Citizen's tone was emotional. The councillors nodded.

The First Citizen continued.

'We crossed the steppe,' the First Citizen declared.

'We survived a hostile environment.'

None of the councillors disagreed.

'Our needs are modest.'

The First Citizen was almost pleading. The councillors hardly needed to be convinced.

‘We ask for what any traveller requests. We ask for water. We ask for water for our beasts. We ask for water for ourselves. We ask for grain.

‘We will buy the grain. We will buy any beasts that need to be slaughtered before winter. We will buy them willingly.’

The councillors nodded. The councillors murmured.

‘And what did these people do?’ the First Citizen demanded.

‘What did they do when we request the hospitality of the road?’

The First Citizen paused. The pause was for effect. The First Citizen looked around.

The councillors did not want to meet his eye. The councillors did not want to be seen to be avoiding his gaze.

‘What did they do?’ the First Citizen asked again.

Rhetorically, the First Citizen answered his own question.

‘They deceived us. They entrapped us. They betrayed us. They tried to cut us off in small groups.’

One of the few councillors with courage looked up. The councillor stared. The councillor’s lips parted. You could not quite say the councillor was open-mouthed.

‘They have manned their defences.’

The First Citizen flung out one arm.

‘They lurk behind the thorns with poisoned arrows and stone-tipped spears. They threaten our women and children. They sabotage our mission.’

The councillors stirred. The councillors were restless.

‘We must act,’ the First Citizen declared.

'We must strike. We must save our army.'

The First Citizen looked around. The First Citizen looked his councillors in the eye.

'Do you want our brave soldiers to die of thirst in the steppe? Do you want our women and children to be seized? Do you want them to be enslaved and raped?'

The councillors shook their heads. The councillors were emphatic. The murmuring was loud. The councillors wanted no such thing.

Sister's Son stepped into the circle. The First Citizen looked round. The councillors gasped.

Sister's Son looked down his nose at First Citizen.

'They protect themselves against marauders,' Sister's Son said.

'They protect their wives and children. They protect the graves of their ancestors. They protect the shrines of their Gods.

'And you are you going to murder them?'

Sister's Son's voice was thick with contempt. Sister's Son's mouth was twisted. Sister's Son was sneering.

The circle froze. The silence was appalled.

'Bind him,' First Citizen said.

Nobody moved.

'Bind him!' First Citizen said again.

Two of the thugs stuck their clubs in their belts. The two thugs moved forward.

The other thugs tapped their clubs in the palms of their hands. The other thugs watched the councillors.

The councillors did not look at the thugs. The councillors did not want to see.

30

The pit was deep. The pit was longer than it was wide.

The Little People dug the pit parallel to the river. There was a huge heap of earth along each side of the pit. The Little People did not bring ladders from the Old City. The Little People did not know they would be digging.

The Little People did not bring saws. The Little People did not think they would need saws. Without saws the Little People could not cut down the palm trees. The Little People could not make the trunks into ladders.

At the narrow ends of the pit the Little People left ramps of earth. The Little People could climb into the pit. The Little People could climb down. The Little People could climb up again.

The Little People worked steadily all day. The sun was high. The ripples on the river were liquid fire. The sand in the desert was a river.

No-one had told the Little People what to do. No-one organised them.

You could leave the Little People alone. The Little People would know what to do. If the Little People wanted to do something they would do it.

The women laid out the bodies. The women washed the bodies. The women washed off the blood and the dirt and the soot.

The women arranged the bodies in parallel rows on the open ground in between the pit and the river. The women sent the boys away. The women straightened the limbs of the bodies. The women brushed the hair from the faces of the bodies. The women had nothing to cover the nakedness of the bodies.

The women sent the girls out into the grassland to pick flowers and tear sprigs from the bushes. The young men with their sharpened sticks and their nailed clubs were still on watch.

One or two of the young men found an abandoned sword under a bush or a dagger in a ditch. The best-armed of the young men were trying to be leaders.

The women sang while they washed the dead. The women sang the songs they would sing for their mothers when they died of old age. The women sang the songs they would sing for their children when they died of sickness. The women sang the songs they would sing for their menfolk when the temple guards beat them too hard and the men never got up again. The women sang the songs even though the dead they were singing for were not the dead of the People.

Some of the adult men picked over the remains of the camp. The adult men collected scraps of canvas from the burned tents and the wrecked wagons. The adult men collected bits of torn sack that the Riders had left behind when they looted the Elder Brothers' camp.

The adult men picked up anything else that seemed to have meaning. The adult men picked up a length of cord. The adult men picked up a fragment of a pot.

Half a dozen of the men were climbing over the bed of a wagon. The wagon was almost intact except for its wheels and its shafts. The men were hacking off the bits that were too badly burned.

Some of the men were resting. The men were lying on the grass or sitting on the mound of earth by the pit.

One at a time, the women stood up. The men who were resting noticed. The men stood up too.

A couple of the women walked over to the sack of the camp. The men collecting the scraps of canvas and hemp saw the women coming.

The men stopped. The men stood where they were with the scraps in their hands. The men watched the women.

The women walked up to the wagon bed. The men in the wagon bed stopped what they were doing.

The men leaned on their forearms on the sides of the wagon. The men leaned with their backs against the planks. The men watched the women come.

The women talked. The men nodded. Some of the men looked towards the pit as they listened. The men were thinking what they had to do.

The women turned away. The women walked over to the pit. The men jumped off the wagon bed. The men started fixing ropes. The men shouted at each other and waved their arms.

When the women reached the pit they stopped. The women turned back. The women looked across at the other men, the men who were standing in the camp.

One by one, the men stepped away. The men walked towards the women. Soon there was a file of men walking towards the women with scraps of hemp and canvas in their hands.

When the men came up to the women they stopped. The men placed the scraps of hemp and canvas on the ground at the feet of the women. One by one the men turned away. The men filed back towards the wagon bed.

There was a pile of cloth by the head of the pit at the feet of the women. The women turned away. The women walked back towards the bodies where they lay in rows by the riverside on the grass.

The men crowded round the wagon bed. The men picked up the ropes and got down behind the tailgate. The men cursed and sweated and dragged the wagon over to the pit. Then the men stood up.

The men wiped their foreheads with the backs of their forearms. The men put their hands on their hips and blew out the air through their mouths. Some of the men wandered over to the pit. The men looked down.

Some of the men started to argue. The men waved their fists in the air and shouted. The men moved this way and that in a tight group, as one argument or another carried the day. The rest of the men watched them argue. The rest of the men grinned.

The shouting changed. The men backed away from each other. The men waved their hands up and down in the air, palms flat. The men turned their backs on each other and walked off.

The watchers caught each others' eyes. The watchers laughed.

The men got down around the wagon bed. The men untied the ropes and fixed them again in different places. Then some of the men got up on the banks of earth at the sides the pit. The men dragged the ropes with them.

The men pulled and pushed and dragged the wagon till it hung in the air above the pit. The men's muscles strained. The men locked their hips and their knees. The men trembled.

The men lowered the wagon into the pit. The men cursed and yelled. The men strained. The men ground their teeth.

When the wagon bed touched the earth at the bottom of the pit the men cheered. The men waved their arms. The men dropped the ropes.

Some of the men climbed up on top of the banks of earth beside the pit. Other men climbed down the ramps to loosen the ropes. The rest of the men walked away from the pit. The men walked towards the women.

The girls formed a ragged circle round the lines of bodies. The girls sang a song. It was a different song.

The women waited for the men to come up.

The women pointed at different bodies in turn. The women said things to the men. The men watched the bodies while the women spoke. The men nodded.

The women walked over to the pit. The women walked down the ramps into the house of the dark.

The men watched them. Some of the men shouted. The women shouted back. The women gave as good as they got.

The first four men picked up the first of the bodies. The four men hefted the body shoulder high. One of the four men gave the count. On three the men moved off.

The men moved slowly. The men kept the body steady. The men walked towards the pit.

The next four men picked up the next body. They followed the first four men.

A file of men formed. The file snaked across the grass towards the pit. Each little group of men was carrying a body.

The girls came behind them. The girls sang. The girls swung their feet in time with the rhythm of the voices. The girls looked down as they walked. The girls copied each others' moves.

Four men walked down the ramp. The four men were carrying the body of the First Wife of the Last King of the Elder Brothers. The First Wife of the Last King of the Elder Brothers was the Queen of the Old City.

The Queen of the Old City was naked. The Queen of the Old City was pale. The Queen of the Old City's neck was broken. The Queen of the Old City's body bore livid scars.

The women waited in the wagon bed. The women showed the men where they wanted them to lay the body of the Last Queen.

The men teased the women. The women mocked the men. The men set down the body. Then the men walked up the opposite ramp.

The women decked the body of the First Wife. The women joked and laughed.

The women laid a frayed and knotted cord across the Last Queen's forehead. The women laid the cord across the Last Queen's forehead in mockery of the Last Queen's royal diadem.

One of the women poked the Last Queen's neck to find the broken vertebra. When the Last Queen's head rolled the woman gasped. The woman jumped back. The woman's friend slapped her hand. The woman's friend was laughing.

The women laid leafy twigs in the wagon bed around the Last Queen's head and shoulders. The girls had found the twigs in the fields below the levée. The girls had brought the twigs to the women. The women laid the leafy twigs around her head and shoulders in mockery of the Last Queen's royal treasures.

The women fixed flowers in the Last Queen's ears. The women fixed lengths of vine around the Last Queen's wrists and ankles. The flowers and vines were a mockery of the Last Queen's precious ear-rings. The flowers and vines were a mockery of her gorgeous bangles.

The women covered the belly and the loins of the mother of seven sons with a scrap of sacking.

The sacking was charred at the edges. The men had found the sacking in the wreckage of the camp.

The burned sacking was a mockery of the proud garment of the Last Queen's royal body.

The women finished. The women rubbed their hands together above the Last Queen's body. The women brushed their hands together in the air.

The women put their hands behind them. The women kept their fingers loose. The women kept their fingers pointing down. The women shook their hands. The women did that several times.

They let the bad energy from the Last Queen's body dissipate in the air. They let the bad energy from the Last Queen's body soak into the earth where it would be neutralised and made safe.

The women muttered curses. Then the women turned their backs.

The women called the men. The men brought more bodies. The men laid them out in the wagon bed around the body of the Last Queen. The men laid out the bodies in mockery of the Last Queen's royal hand-maidens.

The women decked the bodies of the hand-maidens too. The women mocked their bodies also.

The women climbed out of the wagon bed. The women stood in the bottom of the pit.

The women slapped each others' shoulders. The women nudged each other in the ribs. The women laughed and jeered. The women didn't look back.

The file of men brought bodies to the pit. The bodies came in a constant flow. The women made the men lay the bodies on the bare earth in rows.

The women decked the bodies. The bodies filled half the pit. Then the women went a little mad.

A woman dropped what she was doing. The woman straightened up. The woman clasped both hands to her head. The woman screamed.

Her friends scolded her. The woman started talking. The woman was excited. The woman's friends clapped their hands. Her friends started talking too.

The women looked up at the men on top of the bank of earth above the pit. The women whistled. The women cat-called. The men shouted back.

The women shouted at the men excitedly. The men whooped and jeered. Twenty or thirty of the men ran off.

In the bottom of the pit in the house of the dark four or five women broke into a dance. The women held their hands in the air.

The women followed each other in a circle. The women stamped. The women stamped their bare feet on the earth at the bottom of the pit in the House of the Dead.

The women stamped in rhythm. The women waved their hands. The women waved their hands from side to side in the pit in the house of the dead.

The other women stood around. The other women watched. They jeered.

The men came back. The men were dragging two dead donkeys. The men were dragging a slaughtered horse.

The men dragged the slaughtered animals into the pit. The men arranged the slaughtered animals in a line on the floor.

The men put scraps of canvas on the backs of the donkeys. The scraps of canvas were a mockery of the ornate saddles of the royal mounts.

The men leaned a broken wagon wheel against the bloated belly of the horse. The broken wheel was a mockery of the splendour of the Last King's fighting chariots.

The men laid out the bodies of men in rows. The rows were a mockery of the disciplined ranks of guards in the citadel of the Last King.

The men tucked broken branches and bits of wagon shaft under the arms of the dead men on parade. The branches were a mockery of the tall spears of the marching regiments.

The men put bits of basket and fragments of pot on the heads of the rows of the dead men on the floor of the house of the dead. The pots were a mockery of the fine bronze helmets of the guards of the Last King.

The men stood back. They pointed at the dead men they had shamed. The men laughed. The men left the pit.

The women started a dance. It was a stamping jeering mocking dance. The women danced it in a circle.

The men on top of the pit picked up the rhythm of the mocking dance. The men stamped the rhythm with their feet. The men clapped it with their hands.

The women stamped harder. The women pulled open their tunics and lifted their breasts. The women raised their skirts. The women jeered at the men.

The men whistled. The men lifted their tunics and spread their knees. The men shook themselves at the women.

The sun sunk low. The women danced in shadow. The Last Queen and her royal attendants lay in the house of the dark.

It was the last sleep of the Last Queen and her splendid royal attendants.

The Last Queen and her splendid royal attendants slept undisturbed by the Little People dancing around them. The Last Queen and her splendid royal attendants did not feel the insults. The Last Queen and her royal attendants were dead.

Who knows what the spirits of the Last Queen and her royal attendants felt when the women danced in the shadows in the pit of the House of the Dead?

31

The ashes smouldered. There was a circle of thick black ash where the fence had once stood. There were piles of ash where the thatch had burned and the walls had collapsed.

From time to time a charred beam crashed. The Citizens Guard turned round.

Grey smoke blew across the ruins.

A charred cow lay with its feet in the air. The body of a fighter was pinned to the ground by a broken spear. A dog yapped.

There were a few captives. The captives were under guard. The captives were being kept to one side.

The women were tied by their ankles to felled trunks. The women were allowed to sit.

The men had their hands tied together. There were sticks forced through the elbows of the men behind their backs. The men were kneeling.

The children were dejected.

The guards leered. The guards taunted the prisoners.

The people stood in a crescent. The people were several ranks thick. The people were a pack.

Between the horns of the crescent was a crazy tower. The tower was made of poles lashed together. The tower had a platform at the top and a walkway up one side.

The platform was uneven. The platform had gaps between the poles.

The walkway sloped up the side of the tower. Then the walkway turned back on itself and sloped back up the other way. The walkway reached the top by stages. The walkway looked precarious.

First Citizen stood apart from the tower. First Citizen was preoccupied.

The councillors were grave.

Sister's Son knelt with his hands bound. Sister's Son's long hair shaded his face. Sister's Son did not move. Sister's Son was expressionless. The guards who watched Sister's Son were still.

The people stared at Sister's Son. The men's eyes wandered. The men looked at the points of the spears of the Citizens Guard.

The women looked down. The women drew their veils across their faces. The women reached out their hands. The women drew their children to them.

Under their eyebrows the people considered the First Citizen. When the First Citizen looked up the people looked away.

First Citizen was in the centre of the crescent. The whole of the people were ranged around him. The people were waiting for him. First Citizen was the leader of the pack.

First Citizen spoke. The people sighed.

'I am minded to clemency,' First Citizen said.

First Citizen looked at his councillors. The councillors looked back at First Citizen. The councillors were hesitant.

The First Citizen studied the councillors. Then the First Citizen spoke again.

'I have no son,' the First Citizen said.

First Citizen jerked his chin. The councillors turned to look at Sister's Son.

'He is blood.'

The councillors protested.

'He is a traitor!' the councillors cried.

'He is an evil counsellor! He is a whisperer! He lurks in corners!'

Something like a smile lifted the First Citizen's lips.

'His mother is our sister,' the First Citizen said.

'He is our sister's son.'

'He plots!' cried the councillors.

'He lies! He schemes! He is a danger to us all!'

The First Citizen turned his hand palm upwards.

'Make an example of him!' the councillors shouted.

The councillors shook their fists.

The First Citizen threw up his hands.

'Very well,' First Citizen said.

'I shall expel him from the army.'

The councillors gasped. Bolder than the rest one councillor stepped forward.

'It is no excuse!' the councillor shouted.

The First Citizen stepped back.

'It is far worse!' the councillor cried.

The First Citizen's mouth dropped open.

The councillor howled.

'He has violated the ties of blood!'

The First Citizen stared. The First Citizen threw his cloak across his shoulder. The First Citizen glanced at the guards. The First Citizen nodded.

The Free Citizens sighed.

One of the guards changed his spear to his other hand. The guards both seized the First Citizen's Sister's Son under his arms. The guards pulled First Citizen's Sister's Son up.

First Citizen's Sister's Son staggered. The guards were not gentle.

The crowd groaned. The sound went through the ranks like a wind through corn. The prisoners stared.

The guards turned abruptly. The guards stepped off. The guards gave their prisoner no warning. The prisoner lost his footing. The prisoner fell.

The guards held him. The guards were strong men. The guards did not break their step.

The guards dragged First Citizen's Sister's Son. The toes of First Citizen's Sister's Son's feet dragged twin furrows in the dust behind him.

The crowd stared. The faces of the crowd were serious. There was a hint in their expressions of concern or even hurt. The crowd felt the humiliation of First Citizen's Sister's Son.

The escort approached the crazy tower. The escort dragged the prisoner with them.

An under-officer stepped forward. The under-officer was an old regular. The old regular knew how things were done.

The under-officer raised his hand. The guards looked up. The under-officer lifted his chin.

The guards stopped. The prisoner sagged.

The prisoner's knees bent. The guards lifted the prisoner. The prisoner's body sagged.

The guards got the prisoner on his feet. The prisoner swayed. The guards held him.

The prisoner steadied. The prisoner stood upright.

The prisoner's face was slack. The prisoner's eyes rolled.

The crowd moaned.

The guards looked at the under-officer. The under-officer nodded.

The guards braced the prisoner. The prisoner's head swayed.

The guards moved off. The prisoner staggered. The prisoner kept his footing.

The escort marched the prisoner to the base of the tower. A great breath went up from the crowd.

First Citizen wrapped his cloak around him. It was unnecessary. The morning was not cold. First Citizen moved off with dignity.

The councillors hesitated. The councillors looked at each other. The councillors studied the First Citizen's retreating back. The councillors made gestures at each other too. Finally the councillors also moved off. The councillors followed the First Citizen in a ragged file.

The First Citizen stopped. The First Citizen stood back from the escort party and well back from the base of the crazy tower. The First Citizen stood aside from the under-officer and his detail. The First Citizen gave no sign.

The Citizens were restless. The women at the back of the crescent pushed forward. The men in the front ranks at first resisted. The women were too many for them.

The crescent moved forward. The crescent moved inward. The horns of the crescent became tight. The pack closed up round the leader.

The under-officer took a decision. The under-officer looked both ways. The under-officer stepped forward. The First Citizen saw the movement. The First Citizen looked up. The under-officer stopped. The under-officer saluted. The First Citizen nodded.

The under-officer turned. The under-officer gestured to his detail. The under-officer marched off towards the scaffold. The under-officer's detail fell in behind.

The prisoner must have heard the boots of the detail in the dirt. Perhaps he sensed them.

The prisoner's shoulders sagged. The prisoner's knees buckled. The crowd moaned.

First Citizen turned. First Citizen looked at the crowd. From that distance First Citizen could not have made out individual faces. Officially the councillors also turned. The councillors looked as well.

The crowd went silent. The crowd were still.

In the burned-out village a log fell. A flurry of ashes flew up. A wisp of smoke twisted upwards in the wind. The wisp of smoke dissipated slowly.

32

It was dark. The Little People stood on the grassland beside the river. The Little People filled the whole space between the levée and the pit. The Little People were silent and motionless. All the Little People faced the same way.

In the desert a jackal barked. Night birds called.

The moon rose. The night turned grey.

The faces of the Little People were pale beneath their black hair. The children whimpered. Their mothers shushed them.

The Little People had raised a mound above the pit. The silhouette of the mound was solid black in the moonlight in front of the crowd.

Nobody spoke. Nobody moved.

Old Woman came forward. Old Woman was leaning on a staff.

Old Woman's knees were bent. Old Woman's hips were stiff. Old Woman's unbound hair straggled over her shoulders.

Old Woman moved very slowly. Old Woman reached the bottom of the mound. Old Woman stopped.

A man ran forward. The man put out his hand. Angrily, Old Woman waved him away.

The man walked off. The man kept his head down. The man disappeared into the crowd.

Old Woman wrapped both hands around her staff. Old Woman lifted her staff and planted it firmly in the soil of the slope in front of her.

Old Woman got her breath. Old Woman took two awkward steps. Old Woman was on the beginning of the slope. Then Old Woman lifted her staff again.

The slope was steep. Old Woman toiled. The Little People watched her.

Old Woman never faltered. Old Woman never deviated from a straight line.

Old Woman climbed the mound. The loose earth trickled out from under Old Woman's sandals. The butt of her staff sank into the earth.

Old Woman pressed her staff down. The earth resisted. The earth held Old Woman's staff. The staff took Old Woman's weight.

The grassland where the Little People stood was quiet. The Little People could hear the hiss of the earth trickling from Old Woman's sandals. The Little People could hear the thud of her staff pressing down.

Old Woman made it to the top. Old Woman dropped her staff. The whole of the grassland sighed.

Old Woman placed her hands on her hips. The Little People saw her shoulders heave.

Old Woman dropped her hands. Old Woman walked slowly forward. Old Woman reached a point half-way across the mound. Old Woman stopped.

Old Woman turned to the left. Old Woman walked forward again.

Old Woman was a black shape. Old Woman walked along the dark spine of the black silhouette.

Old Woman reached the centre of the spine. Old Woman turned. Old Woman faced the Little People on the grassland.

Old Woman raised her head. Old Woman looked above the heads of the Little People. Old Woman looked over the top of the levée. Old Woman looked out across the desert.

In the darkness the people could not see if Old Woman's eyes were open. The people could not tell what Old Woman was looking at.

Old Woman raised her arms. Old Woman reached her arms out in front of her body. Old Woman held her arms horizontal. Old Woman held her hands out flat. Old Woman's palms were turned down.

The people murmured. Old Woman spoke.

'You will eat clay for bread in the House of the Dark,' Old Woman intoned.

The Little People groaned.

'You will drink muddy water.'

The Little People inhaled through their teeth. The breath of the Little People hissed.

'The bones of your daughters will be scattered on the waste ground. Your sons will wander. Your daughters' sons and your sons' sons and the sons of their sons shall be nameless.'

The Little People jeered.

'The tablets of the annals of your husband's reign will be shattered. The lists of the reigns of your husband's fathers will be lost.'

The Little People howled.

'The images of your gods will be broken. The walls of your palace will be thrown down.'

The Little People stamped and shouted.

'Weeds will grow between the flagstones of your courtyards. Owls will nest in your rafters.'

The Little People roared with laughter.

'Bodies will lie unburied on the floors of your palaces.'

The Little People slapped their thighs. The Little People laughed again.

'The scales will rust in your chamberlain's anteroom.'

The Little People went wild.

'Your language will be forgotten!' Old Woman crowed.

Dutifully the Little People applauded.

'Your nation and your lineage will vanish from the world of men!'

The Little People shrieked and howled.

'You will remember that we dug the earth,' Old Woman intoned.

The Little People murmured.

'You will remember we sat at the loom.'

The murmuring was louder.

'You will remember we hauled and dressed the stones for your palaces and your castles!'

The Little People agreed. Old Woman was becoming hoarse.

'We suffered every day of our lives!'

The Little People roared. The Little People raised their hands in the air. The Little People shook their fists.

Old Woman thrust her arms upwards. She turned her hands to the sky.

'You will suffer to the end of time!' Old Woman howled.

The Little People gasped. The Little People looked up.

The locks of Old Woman's hair writhed around her neck. The locks of her hair were snakes.

The shadows etched the hollows of Old Woman's cheeks. Old Woman wiped the spittle from her chin with the back of her hand. Old Woman was breathing hard.

Old Woman planted her feet apart on the top of the mound. Old Woman bent her knees out.

Old Woman lifted her skirt. Old Woman urinated.

The urine fell in a long stream. The urine hissed in the earth. The urine bubbled and boiled.

The grasslands were still. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. The little people could hear Old Woman's urine hiss in the earth of the mound as clearly as if the stream was falling between their own feet.

A red disc appeared on top of the hills. The grey light turned paler.

The crowd turned. In the first dawn light the Little People could see the levée. In the distance the Little People could see the tops of the walls of the Old City. Smoke still rose.

At the back of the crowd the Little People started scrambling up the bank of the levee. The Little People dragged protesting children with them. The Little People wanted to get to the towpath first. The rest of the Little People followed.

The Little People turned their backs on Old Woman. The Little People were eager to get back to the smoking ruins of the Old City. The ruins were home.

A young man stood alone at the bottom of the mound. The young man was waiting for Old Woman. Behind the young man on top of the levée a long black column trudged back along the river bank towards the Old City.

Between the mound and the levée the grass was flattened. Torn scraps of clothing lay around. Here there was a bit of a basket. Over there was a broken sandal.

The dead lay beneath the mound. The dead lay in the House of the Dark. The dead would lie there forever.

33

The prisoner and the escort stood at the bottom of the walkway. The sun was low.

The sun was weak. The wind picked up the dirt.

The prisoner trembled. The prisoner was babbling. The prisoner's lips moved. Nobody could hear. The prisoner was too far away.

The under-officer gestured. A group of guards fell out. The guards walked casually to the base of the tower. The guards stood at the base of the walkway. The citizens stared.

A guard turned. The guard glanced at the under-officer. The under-officer nodded.

The guard turned back. The guard shifted his spear to his other hand. The guard reached up.

The guard grasped a pole. The pole was lashed into the crazy structure.

The guard put his foot on the walkway.

The citizens murmured.

The prisoners looked fearfully at each other. The kneeling prisoners looked at their guards.

The guards did not look back. The guards were staring at the spectacle.

Out in front of them the First Citizen stared as well. First Citizen's chin rested on his chest. First Citizen's throat disappeared in the folds of his cloak. The First Citizen did not move. The First Citizen was waiting.

The guard put his weight on the walkway. The tower shuddered. The poles strained. The lashings groaned.

The guard took a step. The walkway shook.

The citizens gasped. The First Citizen was impassive.

The guard waited. The shaking stopped. The tower was still.

The only sound was the breeze as it played with the poles and the lashings.

The guard released his grip. The guard extended his arm. The guard took a hold again. The guard moved his foot. The tower shook again.

The stomachs of the citizens and their wives turned over. The First Citizen's chin sank down even deeper into the folds of his cloak on his chest.

The councillors murmured. The councillors moved closer to each other. The councillors closed in towards the First Citizen.

The guard made his way step by step to the first turn of the walkway. The guard stood by the corner of the tower. The silent crowd in the crescent around the tower could feel the guard's relief.

Without releasing his grip the guard slowly turned. The guard faced back the way he had come. The guard was ready to walk up to the next turn.

The guard looked at his companions. The guard jerked his head. One of the guard's companions raised his shoulders. The guard's companion put out his hand. The other guards brought their spears even closer to their chests.

One by one the guards made their way up the walkway. The guards waited at the corners. Their companions joined them. The guards moved on.

The under-officer followed. The rest of the detail watched.

Time stopped. Sister's Son babbled. First Citizen waited. The citizens sighed and groaned. The guards climbed.

The guards reached the top. Cautiously the guards moved towards the centre of the platform. The wind whipped the guards' tunics. The guards' spear-points stood in a cluster in the middle of the steppe. The guards were at the highest point for miles.

The first guard to mount the walkway looked back. The first guard caught the under-officer's eye. The under-officer turned to the First Citizen. The First Citizen nodded.

The under-officer turned to the escort and the prisoner. The under-officer waved to the escort. The prisoner was oblivious.

The escort needed the prisoner to cooperate. The escort needed him at least not to be obstructive.

One of the guards went ahead. The other guard brought up the rear. The guards didn't release the prisoner's hands.

The guard in the lead held the prisoner's upper arm. With his free hand the guard in the lead grasped the flimsy structure. The guard seemed to be carrying the prisoner. The other guard looked as if he was holding the prisoner up.

The prisoner shuffled. The prisoner's feet dragged.

The prisoner and the escort moved up the walkway. The prisoner and the escort moved up the tower.

The prisoner and the escort moved slowly. At the end of each ramp the guards changed over.

The crowd watched. The crowd held their breath. The crowd waited for the prisoner to fall. The crowd waited for the guards to lose their grip.

First Citizen watched. First Citizen waited for his will to be defied. First Citizen's face was black. There was no telling what First Citizen might do.

The sun rose. The shadows of the spears on the platform shortened.

The ashes of the village still smouldered. The bodies stank. The prisoners sunk to their knees. The prisoners' heads hung over.

The wind picked up the dust from the steppe in between the crowd and the tower. The crowd did not move. The crowd could not move. The crowd did not need guards to hold them back. The space between the tower and the crowd was void.

The escort and the prisoner crossed the front of the tower. They crossed it at an angle. Every time they crossed the front of the tower they were higher up.

The smoke from the village billowed. Vultures circled high above. In the crowd a dark cloak snapped in the breeze.

The escort clung to the tower. The prisoner hung between them. The guards looked exhausted. The crowd was silent. First Citizen was rigid.

The execution party reached the top. The picket turned to face them. The guards dragged huge breaths into their lungs. The prisoner sagged.

The picket split into two pairs. The guards turned to face each other. The guards stood back. The under-officer stood a little to one side.

First Citizen straightened his cloak. First Citizen inclined his head. First Citizen lifted his head again.

The crowd sighed. A breath slipped through the crowd like the wind in grass. The crowd swayed.

The under-officer gestured to the escort. The guards straightened up. The guards took the prisoner under both his arms. The guards hoisted the prisoner. The guards stood close.

Sister's Son looked around. Sister's Son's head turned.

The escort faced front.

The under-officer gestured again. The guards stepped off. At the edge of the platform the guards halted. The guards tried to make it smart. The guards waited.

In the stillness the crowd could hear the word of command. The crowd could not make it out.

The guards swung back. The guards swung forward.

Sister's Son pitched outwards. Sister's Son went over the edge. Sister's Son's feet caught.

Sister's Son screamed. Sister's Son bounced off the front of the tower. Sister's Son's feet pedalled. Sister's Son spun.

Sister's Son went on screaming.

The escort leaned forward with one knee bent. The escort were immobilised. The escort's heads were down.

Sister's Son hit the ground. The screaming stopped.

The crowd sighed.

The under-officer moved forward. The under-officer approached the edge. The under-officer looked over.

Sister's Son moved. Sister's Son's feet twitched. Sister's Son's head rolled.

Sister's Son groaned.

The crowd groaned. The crowd hissed. The women moaned.

First Citizen's face worked. First Citizen's nostrils flared.

First Citizen turned. First Citizen stalked off.

The detail stood at the base of the tower. The guards didn't look up. The guards glanced sideways. The guards caught each other's eyes.

The guards shuffled off. The guards didn't need a command. You couldn't say the guards marched.

The guards straggled round to the other side of the tower. The guards made a circle around Sister's Son.

The guards lifted their clubs.

34

I sit. I write. I wait.

Great King, I am alone. The Elder Brothers have abandoned me.

The Elder Brothers have abandoned the archives. The Elder Brothers have abandoned the palace. The Elder Brothers have abandoned the Old City.

The Elder Brothers are traitors. The City has been betrayed.

The Elder Brothers are traitors. The history of the Beautiful Land has been betrayed.

There is little water. I must use the water sparingly. The clay will not take the impression of the reed if it is not damp.

I cannot go out. I cannot fetch more water. I will betray the secret entrance to the archives. The Riders will catch me. The Riders will kill me.

I wash my genitals. I wash between my buttocks. I wash under my arms. Every day my skin feels thicker and greasier. My skin writhes.

I want to shed my skin. I am a snake. I lurk among the stones. I lurk underground.

I want to be renewed.

I have barley meal. I have nothing else. The barley meal will last a while.

What is the archive without at least one scribe? What is the palace without an archive?

What is the kingdom without annals of the reign? What is the king if there is no reply to the missives of the Great Kings his brothers?

I hear you laugh, Great King. I hear the cruelty and the contempt.

What is a kingdom without a king, you say? What is a royal line whose last son was thrown out on the midden like the guts of an unclean pig?

I do not know, Great King. I am not a priest. I am not a courtier. I am a scribe.

I do not know the answer to deep questions. All I know is duty.

Why do the scribes my brothers not know duty, Great King? Where have the scribes my brothers gone? What has happened to the scribes my brothers?

I am alone, Great King. I have never been alone. There have always been others. And now there is no-one. I do not understand.

There are sounds. The sounds come from above.

There are smells. The smells pass through the rocks.

I think there are people.

The Elder Brothers have left. I watched them go.

I hid myself. I stayed. They did not look for me.

The Citizens have left.

They seized the gate. They drove away the Watch. They marched across the river.

The Citizens disrespected the City.

I do not count the Little People. No-one counts the Little People.

I fear the Riders. I fear those who come from the North.

I must write about the noises. I must write about the rocks that shift and creak as the weight bears down. I must write about the dust that hisses through the cracks.

I must write about the people.

Who are the people?

The people are shadows.

Is it night outside? Is it day?

The shadows are wraiths. They will suck my blood.

The wraiths are the angry ghosts of the cavalry. The cavalry died on the frontier.

The wraiths are the ghosts of the farmers. The farmers lost their fields.

The wraiths are the fathers who watched their children starve. The wraiths are the mothers who mourned.

Erzulie soothe my mind. Ogbun protect me. Vendredi give me strength. Gods give me strength to trim the reed and press it in the clay.

The Riders will find me. The Riders will kill me.

The Riders will search for the treasures that are not here. The Riders will get nearer.

I will struggle against sleep. Sleep will come. The dreams will take my mind.

I will cry out. The Riders will hear me.

The Riders will find me. The Riders will kill me.

I am waiting to die.

Have you ever waited to die, Great King? Have you ever known that your enemies would find you and kill you? Or is that something you reserve for your captives in your dungeons?

I love the king my master. The king my master is our father. Because I loved the king my master and our father I loved the Great Kings his Royal Brothers. Now I hate them.

Do you hear me, Great King? I hate you. Before I die I will curse you. You will spend eternity in the House of the Dead. You will struggle with broken reeds and dry clay. You will fear the demons. You will fade.

How much longer have I got? How long have I been here? How much more is there still to do? What is there to do? I am sure there was something. Why would I be here if there was nothing?

This is like waiting in the mines of Moria for the Balrog to come.

Have you seen the movie? I can lend you the DVD if you want. If you have got the right player the picture quality is really quite good.

This is a tomb. It is the tomb of the kings. It is the tomb of the Elder Brothers. It is the tomb of the people.

It is the House of the Dead.

I pity the people.

I will die here. I will rot. My flesh will be eaten by worms. My bones will lie in the darkness and the dust.

There will be no rituals. No-one will pray. I will have no grave.

There are archives beyond archives. There are racks where the dust lies thick and undisturbed. There are tablets that have not been read for generations.

There are records. The City has fallen before. The City fell before it was old. It rose again.

This time The City will not rise. I know that.

Am I become a prophet?

The City is lost. The City is hidden under the stones.

The palace is burned. The walls of the palace have fallen.

The entrance to the archives is hidden.

The Riders will have to dig. The Riders will have to roll stones aside.

The Riders will have to find me. The Riders will have to bury my bones. The Riders will have to inter me with the proper rites.

If not the Riders will fail. The Riders will be cursed. The Riders will wither and die. The Riders will not prosper.

Nothing will thrive.

I hear sounds. I hear footsteps. I hear boots on the stone.

My enemies will not take me. I have my dagger. I stole it from the guards.

I am a man of peace.

I can take one of them with me.

35

There are clouds. The moon goes in and out of hiding. There is fine rain. The drizzle is a grey filter. The drizzle masks the starlight.

The campfires splutter. The Citizens feed the fires. The Citizens huddle under the wagons. The Citizens crouch in the shelter of the trees. The Citizens cough in the smoke that hangs and swirls beneath the canvas sheet on poles above the fire.

The night birds are silent. The wolves don't howl. Rain trickles down the backs of the sentries' necks underneath their cloaks. The sentries stare out from beneath the branches. The sentries see nothing. There is no-one.

Round a fire a group of guards carouse. The guards have stood down. The guards drink. The guards try to sing. The guards howl with laughter.

When the guards laugh they are in pain.

The Ladies of the Night share the cloaks of the guards.

In the middle distance a wagon sinks into the mud. The canvas of the tilt is torn. The canvas flaps in the breeze. One of the four wheels of the wagon is broken.

The onagers have been cut free. The onagers have gone.

A little way from the fire are the ruins of a homestead. One corner of the building still stands. There are the remains of two walls. There is a fragment of the roof.

In the murk you can just about make out the outline of the house platform. You cannot tell whether the house collapsed as part of a longer-term socio-economic trend, or whether the inhabitants have simply been the victims of the more recent migration of the Free Citizens. Either way the house is a ruin.

The mud bricks are dissolving in the rain. The mud is trickling down. The remains of the walls are subsiding back into the earth from which they came.

A ditch runs past the ruins of the house. Perhaps it was the ditch that drained the home fields.

Down the sides of the ditch the rain trickles. The water finds its way round the woody little stems and over the exposed roots. The water forms rivulets.

The water stands in the bottom of the ditch. The rain patters softly on the surface of the water. The raindrops are barely audible.

Slowly the water rises. The water rises around the body at the bottom of the ditch. The body is lying in the water.

The body is lying face down. The body is the body of a young woman. The young woman has been lying there a while.

The young woman's tunic is sodden. Her tunic is transparent. Her tunic clings to her skin.

The young woman's curls are saturated. The young woman's curls are flat. The young woman's curls cling to her skull.

The young woman's face is turned to the side. The young woman was beautiful once.

The young woman's neck is twisted. There is blood on the young woman's lips. The young woman's cheeks are discoloured. The young woman was beaten before she died.

There is a red line around the young woman's neck. It is a thin scar. The perpetrators broke the chain when they pulled her necklace off. On the young

woman's forehead there is a pale crescent mark where her amulet protected her skin from the sun. The amulet is missing.

The young woman's arms are twisted back. The perpetrators were holding her. The young woman's arms wrists are bruised. The perpetrators have pulled off her bangles.

The young woman's tunic is torn. The young woman's tunic is rucked up around her hips.

The perpetrators did not do what they did to steal from her. The perpetrators did it because they could.

Given the level of violence we can reasonably infer the involvement of several perpetrators. It took a number of big strong men to do what they did to one young woman.

A close examination, which is not possible under the conditions that prevail, would suggest that there was tissue under the young woman's broken nails, and that the tissue was foreign. I must admit it would give me pleasure to have the presence of that tissue confirmed. I would like to know the young woman had put up a fight, useless as it was. I would exult in rage.

The young woman's legs are somehow misshapen. There is something wrong with her hips. If the young woman was still alive we would be very concerned. We would not have confidence that the therapeutic and rehabilitative techniques required were available at the end of the second millennium BC.

The young woman is not alive. Therapeutic and rehabilitative techniques are not relevant any more. The young woman is dead.

We want to howl. We are in anguish.

I am able to see all this under the clouds and through the mist. I am able to see what happened three thousand two hundred years ago.

I can see it clearly.

I have the gift. I have the vision.

Do you know what the vision is?

In the angle of the ruins of the walls of the homestead another woman sits.

The fragment of roof that still remains gives little shelter. The woman sits there as if it does.

The woman's back is straight. The woman holds her head up. The woman's knees are together. The woman is - or rather perhaps, once was - a woman of position. The woman keeps her dignity.

The woman's hair is long. The woman's hair is thick. The woman's hair is plastered to the sides of her head. The woman's hair is plastered over her shoulders. The woman has been sitting in the rain some time.

The woman's cloak and her gown are soaked. Her cloak and gown cling to her body.

The woman's body has the fullness of maturity. The woman is no longer young. The length of the woman's hair and the richness of the woman's sodden gown suggest that she still thinks she is.

As your eyes get used to the darkness and the drizzle you notice things. You notice that the woman is sitting on a boulder. Someone has rolled it into the corner of the ruined walls.

Someone else must have done that. This is not a woman who rolls boulders on her own.

You also notice that the woman has nothing. The woman has no bundle. There is no stick against the fragment of the house wall. The woman has no basket, no water-skin. The woman does not even have a blanket.

It is not clear who brought the woman here. She is not the kind of woman to find this sort of place without help. And it is not clear what the woman is going to do now.

The woman speaks.

'My servants have abandoned me,' the woman announces.

'The threads are dry on the looms. The hearths gather dust in the kitchens.'

The rain hisses softly on the sodden soil. The guards laugh nearby. The voices of the guards are harsh.

'We shall redouble the sacrifices,' the woman says.

'We shall learn why the gods are angry.'

The woman stares into the drizzle. It occurs to you that the woman is blind. It is difficult to be sure. The woman certainly cannot see what is happening.

The guards and their companions burst into a raucous, bawling, tuneless kind of song. The guards and their companions all know the words.

'Shag 'em all! Shag 'em all!

The long and the short and the tall!

We'll all catch the pox from the whore and her daughter

So drink up, my lads! Shag 'em all!'

The guards and their companions sing the song again and again.

The guards feed the fire. The Ladies huddle under the citizens' cloaks.

The dignified woman behind the walls stares into the drizzle and the gloom.

The rain runs down the dignified woman's cheeks. The rain looks like tears.

The dignified woman's daughter lies in the ditch. The dignified woman's daughter is dead.

The rain falls. In the bottom of the ditch the water rises. The spirit of the dignified woman's daughter sleeps without a grave.

36

The Wooden God stops at the bottom of the hill. The Wooden God's shoulders are hunched. The Wooden God's head is hanging.

The Wooden God plants the butt of his staff in the thin soil. The Wooden God gives the brim of his torn hat a tug.

'Fucking wandering,' the Wooden God grumbles. 'Fucking over-rated. Sore feet, sore fucking arse, sore belly, never a decent night's sleep, days without so much as speaking to another soul, and as for a decent fucking conversation – fuck it! If I'd have known it was going to be as bad as this I never would've fucking joined.'

The Wooden God sighs. The Wooden God is clearly exasperated.

The Wooden God stucks the butt of his staff half a yard further on and plods on up the hill. For a few hundred yards the Wooden God trudges on.

The wind catches the skirts of the Wooden God's long coat. The skirts of the coat flap around Wooden God's knees.

The Wooden God's head comes up. The Wooden God's shoulders come back. The Wooden God starts to look around.

It is dark. Sometimes the wind blows the clouds away.

The moon comes out. The Wooden God can glimpse the stars. Most of the time the scudding clouds cover the moon.

The going is smooth enough. The Wooden God doesn't need much light.

The slope The Wooden God is climbing is in the lee of the ridge. The Wooden God can't see very far.

The Wooden God looks down as he climbs. If you could see the Wooden God you would say he was lost in his own thoughts.

A cloud rolls away. Abruptly the Wooden God stops. Something has caught the Wooden God's eye in the moonlight.

The Wooden God stoops down. The Wooden God puts one big hand in the dirt with the palm towards him. The Wooden God shields something. The Wooden God's face softens. The Wooden God smiles.

The Wooden God is looking at one tiny shoot with two small leaves. If there was enough light the Wooden God could see the pale green of new growth.

The Wooden God squats there watching. The Wooden God seems to think that if he stays there long enough he will see the shoot grow.

The Wooden God stands. The Wooden God brushes the skirts of his coat unnecessarily. The Wooden God stares up at the clouds. The Wooden God peers intently as if he was waiting for a gap.

The Wooden God's face is more relaxed. The lines of his face have been smoothed away.

The clouds part. The Wooden God sees a star. The Wooden God shakes his head.

'One planet,' the Wooden God says.

The Wooden God is incredulous.

'One fucking planet.'

The Wooden God shakes his head again. The Wooden God moves away.

The Wooden God walks on up the hill. The Wooden God's back is straighter now.

The Wooden God picks up his staff as he walks. The Wooden God plants it in front of him. The Wooden God is hitting a rhythm.

A watcher might hear snatches of a strange unmusical sound in the wind. The Wooden God is trying to whistle.

The Wooden God comes to the shoulder of the hill. The Wooden God slows down. The Wooden God looks over into the valley. The Wooden God stops.

The valley is full of lights. The lights are dim.

There are fires. The army of Citizens is keeping the fires burning under the rain. The pack has circled in defence for the night.

The Wooden God stares at the fires. The Wooden God stares for a long time. The Wooden God is reading the pattern.

The cat sticks her head out of the hole in the hat. The cat takes a look. Then the cat pulls her head back in.

There are compact fires. The compact fires are being tended.

The compact fires are spread out in an irregular arc. The arc follows the line of the river. The river is invisible in the darkness.

The compact fires are the watch fires of the Invasion of the People.

There are large patches of fire in the distance. The patches flare up. They smoulder.

The land is on fire.

The large fires are the villages that the People have sacked on their way down the valley. The villages are still burning.

The Wooden God shakes his head and sighs. The Wooden God lifts his torn hat and settles it again.

Underneath the hat the cat squawks. She sticks out a paw and pulls the flap closed. The Wooden God ignores her.

The Wooden God stares at the watch fires of the camp.

'Virus,' the Wooden God says.

The Wooden God shakes his head.

'Fucking virus.'

The Wooden God looks at the smouldering villages.

'They've metastasised,' the Wooden God says.

The Wooden God's voice is dark. The Wooden God's tone was angry.

'Fucking metastasised,' the Wooden God says again.

Enunciating the mouth-filling polysyllable seems to give the Wooden God some satisfaction.

The Wooden God turns his face from the fires. The Wooden God sighs. The Wooden God walks on.

The Wooden God walks up. The Wooden God reaches a low summit. The Wooden God has his back to the burning valley. The Wooden God walks out onto a saddle.

The Wooden God keeps his face down below the brim of his hat. The wind whips the Wooden God's coat. The Wooden God doesn't mind.

The fires are out of sight. The fires are hidden below the curve of the hill.

The Wooden God reaches the further peak. The Wooden God keeps the collar of his coat closed. The Wooden God uses his free hand.

The Wooden God stands motionless. The Wooden God's face says nothing. For a moment the Wooden God is a statue again.

The Wooden God plants the butt of his staff in the damp ground. The Wooden God holds his staff upright. The Wooden God doesn't lean on his staff.

The Wooden God stares out into the darkness. Even with the clouds the Wooden God can see the outline of the next line of hills in front of him and the next line beyond that. There is line after line of hills. The hills reach the horizon. The hills go beyond the horizon.

The world is dark. The world is empty. The Wooden God is alone.

The Wooden God stands on the hilltop. The Wooden God breathes. The Wooden God breathes deeply.

The Wooden God's shoulders rise. The Wooden God closes his collar even tighter. The Wooden God sniffs.

'Bit shit being a god sometimes,' the Wooden God says.

The Wooden God hears himself. The Wooden God hears the self-pitying tone.

The Wooden God shakes his head. The Wooden God breathes out. The breathing rasps. It makes the Wooden God sounds quite annoyed.

The Wooden God breathes in again. The Wooden God becomes calmer.

The muscles of the Wooden God's face don't move. The Wooden God stares. The Wooden God doesn't see anything.

The Wooden God is still. The Wooden God is lost. The Wooden God is lost in time.

Nothing happens.

The Wooden God blinks. The skin around the Wooden God's eyes wrinkles up. The corners of the Wooden God's mouth twitch.

The Wooden God cheers up. The Wooden God speaks again.

The Wooden God's voice is more relaxed.

'It beats being fucking human,' the Wooden God says.

In the darkness underneath the high crown of the broad-brimmed hat the bony little cat meows.

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