

FOSTER MOTHER

DIRECTIONS FOR THE SMALL:

YOU'LL HAVE TO BOTTLE feed it. Give it plenty of strokes and hugs until it'll follow no one but you. Don't let it get too obstreperous. That can happen when no other big ones of its own kind are around. Then hand it over and leave the rest to us.

You may name it if you feel so inclined though a name is not necessary. We'll give it a name of our own choosing if we need one.

Don't expect too much. They have small brains, about the size of two lima beans. As far as we know, their smiles might not be smiles. Their tears, not tears. Though they bleed, they don't feel pain as we do.

Afterward, let it go on with what it has to do. Go live a different story someplace far from here. Don't come back.

Remember it belongs to us.

And so I'm thinking: Lester? Jester? Or, on the other hand, Baladin? Balladeer? He should have a name the opposite of what he will become. It might stand him in good stead, and there might be a little bit of hope.

Probably nobody will ever get to know the name except for the two of us.

He'll have to find his own kind of joy by himself. Best to have a joyful name. At least that. And best we laugh a lot (if that is laughing). Tickle and tussle. Dance.

They call him, "it." The sex is not important to them.

He was absolutely the cutest thing I ever saw. They start out small. Just like us. Little chubby goat-boy. Little chubby donkey-boy. Loves me already. As who else is there but me? I know I mustn't take it personally.

But now, later, little skinny boy and even more goat-like and still the cutest thing I ever saw. Now he calls me Mush, Mushka, Mash.... I don't remember how that started. I call him Kookie, Cookie....

I think he should have a musical instrument. Something that makes a deep bass sound. Tuba or some such? Or the biggest viol there is? Except he's still too small. I think trumpet. That'll sound out nicely from mountain to mountain, though it is a bit on the military side and reminds me of those others who are in charge of us.

See us -- both of us leaping, though I'm not as good at it as he is. See us on cliff edges, naked or almost. Well, he is, the sun browning us. See them, pointing up at us and looking pleased, folding their hands around their important papers, all the paraphernalia of their status and their jobs hanging about them. They wear so much nobody knows what they look like. Are they us or are they some sort of alien?

He depends on me. In the beginning I even chewed his food for him. Better than trying to cut it. They didn't give me a grinder.

We take long walks holding hands. When he gets tired I carry him piggyback. I made him booties. They don't supply footwear or clothes. They say he grows too fast for them to bother. They say he doesn't need shoes. (Actually, they don't supply much of anything.) We fish. We pick flowers. By now he knows the names of all the ones around here. They say he's not smart enough for that, but he is.

We brought home a gopher snake. We hope it stays and lives under our shack. We named it Squiggly. We planted an apple tree. Already he says, "See my tree." We named it Appy.

When he's happy he wiggles all over. They said that wasn't happiness. They said he can't feel much more than rage. I think that's what I'm here for, to make sure it's rage. What he says most of all is "Let's get going." They think I'm too old to "get going" with him. They think I'll hold him back and that will make him angry, but even when he's about to roar at night I'm awake before it happens. I hear his first whimper so I'm by his side before it can turn nasty. I sing to him, long song stories. "That's a Ballad," I say. "That's what I named you, Balladeer."

We live at the top of a strategic pass. He's supposed to get to know the whole region so he can patrol it. We climb to the mountain tops on each side, and across to the dangerous drop-off. He'll be able to

