

Prince of Flowers

Elizabeth Hand

Helen's first assignment on the inventory project was to the Department of Worms. For two weeks she paced the narrow alleys between immense tiers of glass cabinets, opening endless drawers of freeze-dried invertebrates and tagging each with an acquisition number. Occasionally she glimpsed other figures, drab as herself in government-issue smocks, grey shadows stalking through the murky corridors. They waved at her but seldom spoke, except to ask directions; everyone got lost in the museum.

Helen loved the hours lost in wandering the labyrinth of storage rooms, research labs, chilly vaults crammed with effigies of Yanomano Indians and stuffed jaguars. Soon she could identify each department by its smell: acrid dust from the feathered pelts in Ornithology; the cloying reek of fenugreek and syrup in Mammalogy's roach traps; fish and formaldehyde in Ichthyology. Her favourite was Palaeontology, an annex where the air smelled damp and clean, as though beneath the marble floors trickled hidden water, undiscovered caves, mammoth bones to match those stored above. When her two weeks in Worms ended she was sent to Palaeo, where she delighted in the skeletons strewn atop cabinets like forgotten toys, disembodied skulls glaring from behind wastebaskets and bookshelves. She found a *fabrosaurus ischium* wrapped in brown paper and labelled in crayon; beside it a huge hand-hewn crate dated 1886 and marked Wyoming megosaur. It had never been opened. Some mornings she sat with a small mound of fossils before her, fitting the pieces together with the aid of a Victorian monograph. Hours passed in total silence, weeks when she saw only three or four people, curators slouching in and out of their research cubicles. On Fridays, when she dropped off her inventory sheets, they smiled. Occasionally even remembered her name. But mostly she was left alone, sorting cartons of bone and shale, prying apart frail skeletons of extinct fish as though they were stacks of newsprint.

Once, almost without thinking, she slipped a fossil fish into the pocket of her smock. The fossil was the length of her hand, as perfectly formed as a fresh beech leaf. All day she fingered it, tracing the imprint of bone and scale. In the bathroom later she wrapped it in paper towels and hid it in her purse to bring home. After that she started taking things.

At a downtown hobby shop she bought little brass and lucite stands to display them in her apartment. No one else ever saw them. She simply liked to look at them alone.

Her next transfer was to Mineralogy, where she counted misshapen meteorites and uncut gems. Gems bored her, although she took a chunk of petrified wood and a handful of unpolished amethysts and put them in her bathroom. A month later she was permanently assigned to Anthropology.

The Anthropology Department was in the most remote corner of the museum; its

proximity to the boiler room made it warmer than the Natural Sciences wing, the air redolent of spice woods and exotic unguents used to polish arrowheads and axe-shafts. The ceiling reared so high overhead that the rickety lamps swayed slightly in draughts that Helen longed to feel. The constant subtle motion of the lamps sent flickering waves of light across the floor. Raised arms of Balinese statues seemed to undulate, and points of light winked behind the empty eyeholes of feathered masks.

Everywhere loomed shelves stacked with smooth ivory and gaudily beaded bracelets and neck-rings. Helen crouched in corners loading her arms with bangles until her wrists ached from their weight. She unearthed dusty, lurid figures of temple demons and cleaned them, polished hollow cheeks and lapis eyes before stapling a number to each figure. A corner piled with tipi poles hid an abandoned desk that she claimed and decorated with mummy photographs and a ceramic coffee mug. In the top drawer she stored her cassette tapes and, beneath her handbag, a number of obsidian arrowheads. While it was never officially designated as her desk, she was annoyed one morning to find a young man tilted backward in the chair, shuffling through her tapes.

"Hello," he greeted her cheerfully. Helen winced and nodded coolly. "These your tapes? I'll borrow this one some day, haven't got the album yet. Leo Bryant—"

"Helen," she replied bluntly. "I think there's an empty desk down by the slit-gongs."

"Thanks, I just started. You a curator?"

Helen shook her head, rearranging the cassettes on the desk. "No. Inventory project." Pointedly she moved his knapsack to the floor.

"Me, too. Maybe we can work together some time."

She glanced at his earnest face and smiled. "I like to work alone, thanks." He looked hurt, and she added, "Nothing personal — I just like it that way. I'm sure we'll run into each other. Nice to meet you, Leo." She grabbed a stack of inventory sheets and walked away down the corridor.

They met for coffee one morning. After a few weeks they met almost every morning, sometimes even for lunch outside on the Mall. During the day Leo wandered over from his cubicle in Ethnology to pass on departmental gossip. Sometimes they had a drink after work, but never often enough to invite gossip themselves. Helen was happy with this arrangement, the curators delighted to have such a worker — quiet, without ambition, punctual. Everyone except Leo left her to herself.

Late one afternoon Helen turned at the wrong corner and found herself in a small cul-de-sac between stacks of crates that cut off light and air. She yawned, breathing the faint must of cinnamon bark as she traced her path on a crumpled inventory map. This narrow alley was unmarked; the adjoining corridors contained Malaysian artefacts, batik tools, long teak boxes of gongs. Fallen crates, clumsily hewn cartons overflowing with straw were scattered on the floor. Splintered panels snagged her

sleeves as she edged her way down the aisle. A sweet musk hung about these cartons, the languorous essence of unknown blossoms.

At the end of the cul-de-sac an entire row of crates had toppled, as though the weight of time had finally pitched them to the floor. Helen squatted and chose a box at random, a broad flat package like a portfolio. She pried the lid off to find a stack of leather cut-outs curling with age, like desiccated cloth. She drew one carefully from the pile, frowning as its edges disintegrated at her touch. A shadow puppet, so fantastically elaborate that she couldn't tell if it was male or female; it scarcely looked human. Light glimmered through the grotesque latticework as Helen jerked it back and forth, its pale shadow dancing across the wall. Then the puppet split and crumbled into brittle curlicues that formed strange hieroglyphics on the black marble floor. Swearing softly, Helen replaced the lid, then jammed the box back into the shadows. Her fingers brushed another crate, of smooth polished mahogany. It had a comfortable heft as she pulled it into her lap. Each corner of the narrow lid was fixed with a large, square-headed nail. Helen yanked these out and set each upright in a row.

As she opened the box, dried flowers, seeds and wood shavings cascaded into her lap. She inhaled, closing her eyes, and imagined blue water and firelight, sweet-smelling seeds exploding in the embers. She sneezed and opened her eyes to a cloud of dust wafting from the crate like smoke. Very carefully she worked her fingers into the fragrant excelsior, kneading the petals gently until she grasped something brittle and solid. She drew this out in a flurry of dead flowers.

It was a puppet: not a toy, but a gorgeously costumed figure, spindly arms clattering with glass and bone circlets, batik robes heavy with embroidery and beadwork. Long whittled pegs formed its torso and arms and the rods that swivelled it back and forth, so that its robes rippled tremulously, like a swallowtail's wings. Held at arm's length it gazed scornfully down at Helen, its face glinting with gilt paint. Sinuous vines twisted around each jointed arm. Flowers glowed within the rich threads of its robe, orchids blossoming in the folds of indigo cloth.

Loveliest of all was its face, the curve of cheeks and chin so gracefully arched it might have been cast in gold rather than coaxed from wood. Helen brushed it with a finger: the glossy white paint gleamed as though still wet. She touched the carmine bow that formed its mouth, traced the jet-black lashes stippled across its brow, like a regiment of ants. The smooth wood felt warm to her touch as she stroked it with her fingertips. A courtesan might have perfected its sphinx's smile; but in the tide of petals Helen discovered a slip of paper covered with spidery characters. Beneath the straggling script another hand had shaped clumsy block letters spelling out the name prince of flowers.

Once, perhaps, an imperial concubine had entertained herself with its fey posturing, and so passed the wet silences of a long green season. For the rest of the afternoon it was Helen's toy.

She posed it and sent its robes dancing in the twilight room, the frail arms and tiny wrists twitching in a marionette's waltz.

Behind her a voice called, "Helen?"

"Leo," she murmured. "Look what I found."

He hunched beside her to peer at the figure. "Beautiful. Is that what you're on now? Balinese artefacts?"

She shrugged. "Is that what it is? I didn't know." She glanced down the dark rows of cabinets and sighed. "I probably shouldn't be here. It's just so hot..." She stretched and yawned as Leo slid the puppet from her hands.

"Can I see it?" He twisted it until its head spun and the stiff arms flittered. "Wild. Like one of those dancers in *The King and I*." He played with it absently, hypnotized by the swirling robes. When he stopped, the puppet jerked abruptly upright, its blank eyes staring at Helen.

"Be careful," she warned, kneading her smock between her thumbs. "It's got to be a hundred years old." She held out her hands and Leo returned it, bemused.

"It's wild, whatever it is." He stood and stretched. "I'm going to get a soda. Want to come?"

"I better get back to what I was working on. I'm supposed to finish the Burmese section this week." Casually she set the puppet in its box, brushed the dried flowers from her lap and stood.

"Sure you don't want a soda or something?" Leo hedged plaintively, snapping his ID badge against his chest. "You said you were hot."

"No thanks," Helen smiled wanly. "I'll take a raincheck. Tomorrow."

Peeved, Leo muttered and stalked off. When his silhouette faded away she turned and quickly pulled the box into a dim corner. There she emptied her handbag and arranged the puppet at its bottom, wrapping Kleenex about its arms and face. Hairbrush, wallet, lipstick: all thrown back into her purse, hiding the puppet beneath their clutter. She repacked the crate with its sad array of blossoms, hammering the lid back with her shoe. Then she scrabbled in the corner on her knees until she located a space between stacks of cartons. With a resounding crack the empty box struck the wall, and Helen grinned as she kicked more boxes to fill the gap. Years from now another inventory technician would discover it and wonder, as she had countless times, what had once been inside the empty carton.

When she crowded into the elevator that afternoon the leather handle of her purse stuck to her palm like wet rope. She shifted the bag casually as more people stepped on at each floor, heart pounding as she called goodbye to the curator for Indo-Asian Studies passing in the lobby. Imaginary prison gates loomed and crumbled behind Helen as she strode through the columned doors and into the summer street.

All the way home she smiled triumphantly, clutching her handbag to her chest. As she fumbled at the front door for her keys a fresh burst of scent rose from the recesses of her purse. Inside, another scent overpowered this faint perfume — the thick reek of creosote, rotting fruit, unwashed clothes. Musty and hot and dark as the museum's dreariest basement, the only two windows faced on to the street.

Traffic ground past, piping bluish exhaust through the screens. A grimy mirror reflected shabby chairs, an end table with lopsided lamp: furniture filched from college dormitories or reclaimed from the corner dumpster. No paintings graced the pocked walls, blotched with the crushed remains of roaches and silverfish.

But beautiful things shone here, gleaming from windowsill and cracked Formica counters: the limp frond of a fossil fern, etched in obsidian glossy as wet tar; a whorled nautilus like a tiny whirlpool impaled upon a brass stand. In the centre of a splintered coffee table was the imprint of a foot-long dragonfly's wing embedded in limestone, its filigreed scales a shattered prism.

Corners heaped with lemur skulls and slabs of petrified wood. The exquisite cone shells of poisonous molluscs. Mounds of green and golden iridescent beetles, like the coinage of a distant country. Patches of linoleum scattered with shark's teeth and arrowheads; a tiny skull anchoring a handful of emerald plumes that waved in the breeze like a sea-fan. Helen surveyed it all critically, noting with mild surprise a luminous pink geode; she'd forgotten that one. Then she set to work.

In a few minutes she'd removed everything from her bag and rolled the geode under a chair. She unwrapped the puppet on the table, peeling tissue from its brittle arms and finally twisting the long strand of white paper from its head, until she stood ankle-deep in a drift of tissue. The puppet's supporting rod slid neatly into the mouth of an empty beer bottle, and she arranged it so that the glass was hidden by its robes and the imperious face tilted upward, staring at the bug-flecked ceiling.

Helen squinted appraisingly, rearranged the feathers about the puppet, shoring them up with the carapaces of scarab beetles: still it looked all wrong. Beside the small proud figure, the fossils were muddy remains, the nautilus a bit of sea wrack. A breeze shifted the puppet's robes, knocking the scarabs to the floor, and before she knew it Helen had crushed them, the little emerald shells splintering to grey dust beneath her heel. She sighed in exasperation: all her pretty things suddenly looked so mean. She moved the puppet to the windowsill, to another table, and finally into her bedroom. No corner of the flat could hold it without seeming even grimmer than before. Helen swiped at cobwebs above the doorway before setting the puppet on her bedstand and collapsing with a sigh on to her mattress.

In the half-light of the windowless bedroom the figure was not so resplendent. Disappointed, Helen straightened its robes yet again. As she tugged the cloth into place, two violet petals, each the size of her pinky nail, slipped between her fingers. She rolled the tiny blossoms between her palms, surprised at how damp and fresh they felt, how they breathed a scent like ozone, or seawater. Thoughtfully she rubbed the violets until only a gritty pellet remained between her fingers.

Flowers, she thought, and recalled the name on the paper she'd found. The haughty figure wanted flowers.

Grabbing her key and a rusty pair of scissors, she ran outside. Thirty minutes later she returned, laden with blossoms: torn branches of crepe myrtle frothing pink and white, drooping tongues of honeysuckle, overblown white roses snipped from a neighbour's yard; chicory fading like a handful of blue stars. She dropped them all at

the foot of the bed and then searched the kitchen until she found a dusty wine carafe and some empty jars. Once these were rinsed and filled with water she made a number of unruly bouquets, then placed them all around the puppet, so that its pale head nodded amid a cloud of white and mauve and frail green.

Helen slumped back on the bed, grinning with approval. Bottles trapped the wavering pools of light and cast shimmering reflections across the walls. The crepe myrtle sent the palest mauve cloud on to the ceiling, blurring the jungle shadows of the honeysuckle.

Helen's head blurred, as well. She yawned, drowsy from the thick scents of roses, cloying honeysuckle, all the languor of summer nodding in an afternoon. She fell quickly asleep, lulled by the breeze in the stolen garden and the dozy burr of a lost bumblebee.

Once, her sleep broke. A breath of motion against her shoulder — mosquito? spider? centipede? — then a tiny lancing pain, the touch of invisible legs or wings, and it was gone. Helen grimaced, scratched, staggered up and into the bathroom. Her bleary reflection showed a swollen bite on her shoulder. It tingled, and a drop of blood pearled at her touch. She put on a nightshirt, checked her bed for spiders, then tumbled back to sleep.

Much later she woke to a sound: once, twice, like the resonant *plank* of a stone tossed into a well. Then a slow melancholy note: another well, a larger stone striking its dark surface. Helen moaned, turning on to her side. Fainter echoes joined these first sounds, plangent tones sweet as rain in the mouth. Her ears rang with this steady pulse, until suddenly she clenched her hands and stiffened, concentrating on the noise.

From wall to ceiling to floor the thrumming echo bounced; grew louder, diminished, droned to a whisper. It did not stop. Helen sat up, bracing herself against the wall, the last shards of sleep fallen from her. Her hand slipped and very slowly she drew it towards her face. It was wet. Between her fingers glistened a web of water, looping like silver twine down her wrist until it was lost in the blue-veined valley of her elbow. Helen shook her head in disbelief and stared up at the ceiling. From one end of the room to the other stretched a filament of water, like a hairline fracture. As she watched, the filament snapped and a single warm drop splashed her temple. Helen swore and slid to the edge of the mattress, then stopped.

At first she thought the vases had fallen to the floor, strewing flowers everywhere. But the bottles remained on the bedstand, their blossoms casting ragged silhouettes in the dark. More flowers were scattered about the bottles: violets, crimson roses, a tendril rampant with tiny fluted petals. Flowers cascaded to the floor, nestled amid folds of dirty clothes. Helen plucked an orchid from the linoleum, blinking in amazement. Like a wavering pink flame it glowed, the feathery pistils staining her fingertips bright yellow. Absently Helen brushed the pollen on to her thigh, scraping her leg with a hangnail.

That small pain jarred her awake. She dropped the orchid. For the first time it didn't feel like a dream. The room was hot, humid as though moist towels pressed

against her face. As she stared at her thigh the bright fingerprint, yellow as a crocus, melted and dissolved as sweat broke on her skin. She stepped forward, the orchid bursting beneath her heel like a ripe grape. A sickly smell rose from the broken flower. Each breath she took was heavy, as with rain, and she choked. The rims of her nostrils were wet. She sneezed, inhaling warm water. Water streamed down her cheeks and she drew her hand slowly upward, to brush the water from her eyes. She could move it no further than her lap. She looked down, silently mouthing bewilderment as she shook her head.

Another hand grasped her wrist, a hand delicate and limp as a cut iris wand, so small that she scarcely felt its touch open her pulse. Inside her skull the blood thrummed counterpoint to the *gamelan*, gongs echoing the throb and beat of her heart. The little hand disappeared. Helen staggered backward on to the bed, frantically scrambling for the light switch. In the darkness, something crept across the rippling bedsheets.

When she screamed her mouth was stuffed with roses, orchids, the corner of her pillowcase. Tiny hands pinched her nostrils shut and forced more flowers between her lips until she lay still, gagging on aromatic petals. From the rumpled bedclothes reared a shadow, child-size, grinning. Livid shoots of green and yellow encircled its spindly arms and the sheets whispered like rain as it crawled towards her. Like a great mantis it dragged itself forward on its long arms, the rough cloth of its robe catching between her knees, its white teeth glittering. She clawed through the sheets, trying to dash it against the wall. But she could not move. Flowers spilled from her mouth when she tried to scream, soft fingers of orchids sliding down her throat as she flailed at the bedclothes.

And the clanging of the gongs did not cease: not when the tiny hands pattered over her breasts; not when the tiny mouth hissed in her ear. Needle teeth pierced her shoulder as a long tongue unfurled and lapped there, flicking blood on to the blossoms wreathed about her neck. Only when the slender shadow withdrew and the terrible, terrible dreams began did the *gamelans* grow silent.

Nine thirty came, long after Helen usually met Leo in the cafeteria. He waited, drinking an entire pot of coffee before he gave up and wandered downstairs, piqued that she hadn't shown up for breakfast.

In the same narrow hallway behind the Malaysian artefacts he discovered her, crouched over a pair of tapered wooden crates. For a long moment he watched her, and almost turned back without saying anything. Her hair was dirty, twisted into a sloppy bun, and the hunch of her shoulders hinted at exhaustion. But before he could leave, she turned to face him, clutching the boxes to her chest.

"Rough night?" croaked Leo. A scarf tied around her neck didn't hide the bruises there. Her mouth was swollen, her eyes soft and shadowed with sleeplessness. He knew she must see people, men, boyfriends. But she had never mentioned anyone, never spoke of weekend trips or vacations. Suddenly he felt betrayed, and spun away to leave.

"Leo," murmured Helen, absently stroking the crate. "I can't talk right now. I got in so late. I'm kind of busy."

"I guess so." He laughed uncertainly, but stopped before turning the corner to see her pry open the lid of the box, head bent so that he could not tell what it was she found inside.

A week passed. Leo refused to call her. He timed his forays to the cafeteria to avoid meeting her there. He left work late so he wouldn't see her in the elevator. Every day he expected to see her at his desk, find a telephone message scrawled on his memo pad. But she never appeared.

Another week went by. Leo ran into the curator for Indo-Asian Studies by the elevator.

"Have you seen Helen this week?" she asked, and Leo actually blushed at mention of her name.

"No," he mumbled. "Not for a while, really."

"Guess she's sick." The curator shrugged and stepped on to the elevator. Leo rode all the way down to the basement and roamed the corridors for an hour, dropping by the Anthropology office. No Helen, no messages from her at the desk.

He wandered back down the hall, pausing in the corridor where he had last seen her. A row of boxes had collapsed and he kicked at the cartons, idly knelt and read the names on the packing crates as if they held a clue to Helen's sudden change. Labels in Sanskrit, Vietnamese, Chinese, English, crumbling beside baggage labels and exotic postage stamps and scrawled descriptions of contents, wajang goleh, he read. Beneath was scribbled puppets. He squatted on the floor, staring at the bank of crates, then half-heartedly started to read each label. Maybe she'd find him there. Perhaps she'd been sick, had a doctor's appointment. She might be late again.

A long box rattled when he shifted it. kris, read the label, and he peeked inside to find an ornate sword. A heavier box bore the legend sanghyang: spirit puppet. And another that seemed to be empty, embellished with a flowing script: sekar mas, and the clumsy translation prince of flowers.

He slammed the last box against the wall and heard the dull creak of splintering wood. She would not be in today. She hadn't been in for two weeks.

That night he called her.

"Hello?"

Helen's voice; at least a man hadn't answered.

"Helen. How you doing? It's Leo."

"Leo." She coughed and he heard someone in the background. "It's you."

"Right," he said dryly, then waited for an apology, her embarrassed laugh, another cough that would be followed by an invented catalogue of hay fever, colds, flu. But she said nothing. He listened carefully and realized it wasn't a voice he had heard in the background but a constant stir of sound, like a fan, or running water. "Helen?"

You okay?"

A long pause. "Sure. Sure I'm okay." Her voice faded and he heard a high, piping note.

"You got a bird, Helen?"

"What?"

He shifted the phone to his other ear, shoving it closer to his head so he could hear better. "A bird. There's this funny voice, it sounds like you got a bird or something."

"No," replied Helen slowly. "I don't have a bird. There's nothing wrong with my phone." He could hear her moving around her apartment, the background noises rising and falling but never silent. "Leo, I can't talk now. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Tomorrow?" he exploded. "I haven't seen you in two weeks!"

She coughed and said, "Well, I'm sorry. I've been busy. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

He started to argue, but the phone was already dead.

She didn't come in the next day. At three o'clock he went to the Anthropology Department and asked the secretary if Helen had been in that morning.

"No," she answered, shaking her head. "And they've got her down as AWOL. She hasn't been in all week." She hesitated before whispering. "Leo, she hasn't looked very good lately. You think maybe..." Her voice died and she shrugged, "Who knows," and turned to answer the phone.

He left work early, walking his bicycle up the garage ramp and wheeling it to the right, towards Helen's neighbourhood. He was fuming, but a silver of fear had worked its way-through his anger. He had almost gone to her supervisor; almost phoned Helen first. Instead, he pedalled quickly down Pennsylvania Avenue, skirting the first lanes of rush-hour traffic. Union Station loomed a few blocks ahead. He recalled an article in yesterday's *Post*: vandals had destroyed the rose garden in front of the station. He detoured through the bus lane that circled the building and skimmed around the desecrated garden, shaking his head and staring back in dismay. All the roses: gone. Someone had lopped each bloom from its stem. In spots the cobblestones were littered with mounds of blossoms, brown with decay. Here and there dead flowers still dangled from hacked stems. Swearing in disgust, Leo made a final loop, nearly skidding into a bus as he looked back at the plundered garden. Then he headed towards Helen's apartment building a few blocks north.

Her windows were dark. Even from the street the curtains looked filthy, as though dirt and exhaust had matted them to the glass. Leo stood on the kerb and stared at the blank eyes of each apartment window gaping in the stark concrete façade.

Who would want to live here? he thought, ashamed. He should have come sooner. Shame froze into apprehension and the faintest icy sheath of fear. Hurriedly

he locked his bike to a parking meter and approached her window, standing on tiptoe to peer inside. Nothing. The discoloured curtains hid the rooms from him like clouds of ivory smoke. He tapped once, tentatively; then, emboldened by silence, rapped for several minutes, squinting to see any movement inside.

Still nothing. Leo swore out loud and shoved his hands into his pockets, wondering lamely what to do. Call the police? Next of kin? He winced at the thought: as if she couldn't do that herself. Helen had always made it clear that she enjoyed being on her own. But the broken glass beneath his sneakers, windblown newspapers tugging at the bottom steps; the whole unkempt neighbourhood denied that. Why here? he thought angrily; and then he was taking the steps two at a time, kicking bottles and burger wrappers out of his path.

He waited by the door for five minutes before a teenage boy ran out. Leo barely caught the door before it slammed behind him. Inside, a fluorescent light hung askew from the ceiling, buzzing like a wasp. Helen's was the first door to the right. Circulars from convenience stores drifted on the floor, and on the far wall was a bank of mailboxes. One was ajar, stuffed with unclaimed bills and magazines. More envelopes piled on the steps. Each bore Helen's name.

His knocking went unanswered; but he thought he heard someone moving inside.

"Helen," he called softly. "It's Leo. You okay?"

He knocked harder, called her name, finally pounded with both fists. Still nothing. He should leave; he should call the police. Better still, forget ever coming here. But he was here, now; the police would question him no matter what; the curator for Indo-Asian Studies would look at him askance. Leo bit his lip and tested the doorknob. Locked; but the wood gave way slightly as he leaned against it. He rattled the knob and braced himself to kick the door in.

He didn't have to. In his hand the knob twisted and the door swung inward, so abruptly that he fell inside. The door banged shut behind him. He glanced across the room, looking for her; but all he saw was grey light, the gauzy shadows cast by gritty curtains. Then he breathed in, gagging, and pulled his sleeve to his mouth until he gasped through the cotton. He backed towards the door, slipping on something dank, like piles of wet clothing. He glanced at his feet and grunted in disgust.

Roses. They were everywhere: heaps of rotting flowers, broken branches, leaves stripped from bushes, an entire small ficus tree tossed into the corner. He forgot Helen, turned to grab the doorknob and tripped on an uprooted azalea. He fell, clawing at the wall to balance himself. His palms splayed against the plaster and slid as though the surface was still wet. Then, staring upward he saw that it *was* wet. Water streamed from the ceiling, flowing down the wall to soak his shirt cuffs. Leo moaned. His knees buckled as he sank, arms flailing, into the mass of decaying blossoms. Their stench suffocated him; his eyes watered as he retched and tried to stagger back to his feet.

Then he heard something, like a bell, or a telephone; then another faint sound, like an animal scratching overhead. Carefully he twisted to stare upward, trying not to

betray himself by moving too fast. Something skittered across the ceiling, and Leo's stomach turned dizzily. What could be up there? A second blur dashed to join the first; golden eyes stared down at him, unblinking.

Geckos, he thought frantically. She had pet geckos. She *has* pet geckos. Jesus.

She couldn't be here. It was too hot, the stench horrible: putrid water, decaying plants, water everywhere. His trousers were soaked from where he had fallen, his knees ached from kneeling in a trough of water pooling against the wall. The floor had warped and more flowers protruded from cracks between the linoleum, brown fronds of iris and rotting honeysuckle. From another room trickled the sound of water dripping steadily, as though a tap were running.

He had to get out. He'd leave the door open — police, a landlord. Someone would call for help. But he couldn't reach the door. He couldn't stand. His feet skated across the slick tiles as his hands tore uselessly through wads of petals. It grew darker. Golden bands rippled across the floor as sunlight filtered through the grey curtains. Leo dragged himself through rotting leaves, his clothes sopping, tugging aside mats of greenery and broken branches. His leg ached where he'd fallen on it and his hands stung, pricked by unseen thorns.

Something brushed against his fingers and he forced himself to look down, shuddering. A shattered nautilus left a thin red line across his hand, the sharp fragments gilded by the dying light. As he looked around he noticed other things, myriad small objects caught in the morass of rotting flowers like a nightmarish ebb tide on the linoleum floor. Agates and feathered masks; bird of paradise plumes encrusted with mud; cracked skulls and bones and cloth of gold. He recognized the carved puppet Helen had been playing with that afternoon in the Indonesian corridor, its headdress glittering in the twilight. About its neck was strung a plait of flowers, amber and cerulean blossoms glowing like phosphorescence among the ruins.

Through the room echoed a dull clang. Leo jerked to his knees, relieved. Surely someone had knocked? But the sound came from somewhere behind him, and was echoed in another, harsher, note. As this second bell died he heard the geckos' feet pattering as they fled across the ceiling. A louder note rang out, the windowpanes vibrating to the sound as though wind-battered. In the corner the leaves of the ficus turned as if to welcome rain, and the rosebushes stirred.

Leo heard something else, then: a small sound like a cat stretching to wakefulness. Now both of his legs ached, and he had to pull himself forward on his hands and elbows, striving to reach the front door. The clanging grew louder, more resonant. A higher tone echoed it monotonously, like the echo of rain in a well. Leo glanced over his shoulder to the empty doorway that led to the kitchen, the dark mouth of the hallway to Helen's bedroom. Something moved there.

At his elbow moved something else and he struck at it feebly, knocking the puppet across the floor. Uncomprehending, he stared after it, then cowered as he watched the ceiling, wondering if one of the geckos had crept down beside him.

There was no gecko. When Leo glanced back at the puppet it was moving across

the floor towards him, pulling itself forward on its long slender arms.

The gongs thundered now. A shape humped across the room, something large enough to blot out the empty doorway behind it. Before he was blinded by petals, Leo saw that it was a shrunken figure, a woman whose elongated arms clutched broken branches to propel herself, legs dragging uselessly through the tangled leaves. About her swayed a host of brilliant figures no bigger than dolls. They had roped her neck and hands with wreaths of flowers and scattered blossoms on to the floor about them. Like a flock of chattering butterflies they surged towards him, tiny hands outstretched, their long tongues unfurling like crimson pistils, and the gongs rang like golden bells as they gathered about him to feed.