

Days of Wonder by Geoff Ryman

Geoff Ryman's latest novel, *The King's Last Song*, is due out in the US any day now. Of "Days of Wonder," Mr. Ryman says this story could not have taken this form without the help of Anil Menon who suggested that artificial chromosomes could be the vehicle for the "ark" genes. Artificial chromosomes date from the early 1980s when a yeast chromosome was constructed from existing genetic material. For a useful introduction to artificial chromosomes see "Genomics and Gene Therapy: Artificial Chromosomes Coming to Life," Huntington F. Willard, *Science* magazine, 17 November 2000. Available online at www.sciencemag.org.

* * * *

Leveza was the wrong name for her; she was big and strong, not light. Her bulk made her seem both male and female; her shoulders were broad but so were her hips and breasts.

She had beautiful eyes, round and black, and she was thoughtful; her heavy jaws would grind round and round as if imitating the continual motion of her mind. She always looked as if she were listening to something distant, faraway.

Like many large people, Leveza was easily embarrassed. Her mane would bristle up across the top of her head and down her spine. She was strong and soft all at once, and kind. I liked talking to her; her voice was so high and gentle; though her every gesture was blurring and forlorn.

But that voice when it went social! If Leveza saw a Cat crouching in the grass, her whinnying was sudden, fierce and irresistible. All of us would pirouette into a panic at once. Her cry was infallible.

So she was an *afrirador*, one of our sharpshooters, always reared up onto hind quarters to keep watch, always carrying a rifle, always herself a target. My big brave friend. Her rear buttocks grew ever more heavy from constant standing. She could walk upright like an Ancestor for a whole day. Her pelt was beautiful, her best feature, a glossy deep chestnut, no errant Ancestor reds. As rich and deep as the soil under the endless savannah.

We were groom-mates in our days of wonder.

I would brush her, and her hide would twitch with pleasure. She would

stretch with it, as it were taffy to be pulled. We tried on earrings, or tied bows into manes, or corn-rowed them into long braids. But Leveza never rested long with simple pleasures or things easily understood.

Even young, before bearing age, she was serious and adult. I remember her as a filly, slumped at the feet of the stallions as they smoked their pipes, played checkers, and talked about what they would do if they knew how to make electricity.

Leveza would say that we could make turning blades to circulate air; we could pump water to irrigate grass. We could boil water, or make heat to dry and store cud cakes. The old men would chuckle to hear her dreaming.

I thought it was a pointless game, but Leveza could play it better than anyone, seeing further and deeper into her own inherited head. Her groom-sister Ventoo always teased her, "Leveza, what are you fabricating now?"

We all knew that stuff. I knew oh so clearly, how to wrap thin metal round and round a pivot and with electricity, make it spin. But who could be bothered? I loved to run. All of us foals would suddenly sprint through long grass to make the ground thunder, to raise up the sweet smells of herbs, and to test our strength. We had fire in our loins and we wanted to gallop all the way to the sun. Leveza pondered.

She didn't like it when her first heat came. The immature bucks would hee-haw at her and pull back their feeling lips to display their great white plates of teeth. When older men bumped her buttocks with their heads, she would give a little backward kick, and if they tried to mount her, she walked out from under them. And woe betide any low-grade drifter who presumed that Leveza's lack of status meant she was grateful for attention. She would send the poor bag of bones rattling through the long grass. The babysquirrels clutched their sides and laughed. "Young NeverLove wins again."

But I knew. It was not a lack of love that made my groom-mate so careful and reserved. It was an abundance of love, a surfeit of it, more than our kind is meant to have, can afford to have, for we live on the pampas and our cousins eat us.

Love came upon Leveza on some warm night, the moon like bedtime milk. She would not have settled for a quick bump with a reeking male just because the air wavered with hot hormones. I think it would have been the reflection of milklight in black eyes, a gentle ruffling of upper lip, perhaps a

long and puzzled chat about the nature of this life and its consequences.

We are not meant to love. We are meant to mate, stand side by side for warmth for a short time afterward, and then forget. *I wonder who fathered this one?*

Leveza knew and would never forget. She never said his name, but most of us knew who he was. I sometimes caught her looking toward the circle of the Great Men, her eyes full of gentleness. They would gallop about at headball, or talk seriously about axle grease. None of them looked her way, but she would be smiling with a gentle glowing love, her eyes fixed on one of them as steadily as the moon.

One night, she tugged at my mane. "Akwa, I am going to sprog," she said, with a wrench of a smile at the absurdity of such a thing.

"Oh! Oh Leveza, that's wonderful. Why didn't you tell me, how did this happen?"

She ronfled in amusement, a long ruffling snort. "In the usual way, my friend."

"No, but ... oh you know! I have seen you with no one."

She went still. "Of course not."

"Do you know which one?"

Her whole face was in milklight. "Yes. Oh yes."

Leveza was both further back toward an Ancestor than anyone I ever met, and furthest forward toward the beasts. Even then it was as if she was pulled in two directions, Earth and stars. The night around us would sigh with multiple couplings. I was caught up in the season. Sex was like a river, washing all around us. I was a young mare then, I can tell you, wide of haunch, slim of ankle. I plucked my way through the grass as if it were the strings of a harp. All the highest-rankers would come and snuffle me, and I surprised myself. Oh! I was a pushover. One after another after another.

I would come back feeling like a pasture grazed flat; and she would be lumped out on the ground, content and ready to welcome me. I nuzzled her ear, which flicked me like I was a fly, and I would lay my head on her buttock to sleep.

“You are a strange one,” I would murmur. “But you will be kind to my babes. We will have a lovely house.” I knew she would love my babies as her own.

* * * *

That year the dry season did not come.

It did go cooler, the afternoon downpours were fewer, but the grass did not go gray. There was dew when we got up, sparkling and cold with our morning mouthfuls. Some rain came at nighttime in short, soft caresses rather than pummeling on our pavilion roofs. I remember screens pulled down, the smell of grass, and warm breath of a groom-mate against my haunches.

“I’m preggers too,” I said some weeks later and giggled, thrilled and full of butterflies. I was young, eh? In my fourth year. I could feel my baby nudge. Leveza and I giggled together under our shawls.

It did not go sharply cold. No grass-frost made our teeth ache. We waited for the triggering, but it did not come.

“Strangest year I can remember,” said the old women. They were grateful, for migrations were when they were eaten.

That year! We made porridge for the toothless. We groomed and groomed, beads and bows and necklaces and shawls and beautiful grass hats. Leveza loved it when I made up songs; the first, middle and last word of every line would rhyme. She’d snort and shake her mane and say “How did you do that; that’s so clever!”

We would stroke each other’s stomachs as our nipples swelled. Leveza hated hers; they were particularly large like aubergines. “Uh. They’re gross. Nobody told me they wobble in the way of everything.” They ached to give milk; early in her pregnancy they started to seep. There was a scrum of baby squirrels around her every morning. Business-like, she sniffed and let them suckle. “When my baby comes, you’ll have to wait your turn.” The days and nights came and went like the beating of birdlike wings. She got a bit bigger, but never too big to stand guard.

Leveza gave birth early, after only nine months.

It was midwinter, in dark Fehveroo when no one was ready. Leveza pushed her neck up against my mouth for comfort. When I woke she said,

“Get Grama for me.” Grama was a high-ranking midwife.

I was stunned. She could not be due yet. The midwives had stored no oils or bark-water. I ran to Grama, woke her, worried her. I hoofed the air in panic. “Why is this happening now? What’s wrong?”

By the time we got back, Leveza had delivered. Just one push and the babe had arrived, a little bundle of water and skin and grease on the ground behind her rear quarters.

The babe was tiny, as long as a shin, palomino, and covered in soft orange down so light that he looked hairless. No jaw at all. How would he grind grass? Limbs all in soft folds like clouds. Grama said nothing, but held up his feet for me to see. The forelegs had no hoof-buds at all, just fingers; and his hind feet were great soft mitts. Not quite a freak, streamlined and beautiful in a way. But fragile, defenseless, and nothing that would help Leveza climb the hierarchy. It was the most Ancestral child I had ever seen.

Grama set to licking him clean. I looked at the poor babe’s face. I could see his hide through the sparse hair on his cheeks. “Hello,” I said. “I’m your Groom-Mummy. Your name is Kaway. Yes it is. You are Kaway.”

A blank. He couldn’t talk. He could hardly move.

I had to pick him up with my hands. There was no question of using my mouth; there was no pelt to grip. I settled the babe next to Leveza. Her face shone love down on him. “He’s beautiful as he is.”

Grama jerked her head toward the partition; we went outside to talk. “I’ve heard of such births; they happen sometimes. The inheritances come together like cards shuffling. He won’t learn to talk until he’s two. He won’t walk until then, either. He won’t really be mobile until three or four.”

“Four!” I thought of all those migrations.

Grama shrugged. “They can live long, if they make it past infancy. Maybe fifty years.”

I was going to ask where they were now, and then I realized. They don’t linger in this world, these soft sweet angelic things.

They get eaten.

* * * *

My little Choova was born two months later. I hated childbirth. I thought I would be good at it, but I thrashed and stomped and hee-hawed like a male in season. *I will never do this again!* I promised. I didn't think then that the promise would come true.

"Come on, babe, come on my darling," Leveza said, butting me with her nose as if herding a filly. "It will be over soon, just keep pushing."

Grama had become a friend; I think she saw value in Leveza's mindful way of doing things. "Listen to your family," she told me.

My firstborn finally bedraggled her way out, tawny, knobbly, shivering and thin, pulled by Grama. Leveza scooped my baby up, licked her clean, breathed into her, and then dandled her in front of my face. "This is your beautiful mother." Choova looked at me with intelligent love and grinned.

Grama whinnied the cry that triggers *Happy Birth!* Some of our friends trotted up to see my beautiful babe, stuck their heads through the curtains. They tossed their heads, chortled and nibbled the back of her neck.

"Come on, little one. Stand! Stand!" This is what the ladies had come to see. Leveza propped Choova up on her frail, awkward, heartbreaking legs, and walked her toward me. My baby stumbled forward and collapsed like a pile of sticks, into the sheltering bay of my stomach.

Leveza lowered Kaway in front of Choova's nostrils. "And this is your little groom-brother Kaway."

"Kaway," Choova said.

Our family numbered four.

We did not migrate for one whole year. The colts and fillies would skitter unsteadily across the grass, safe from predators. The old folk sunned themselves on the grass and gossiped. High summer came back with sweeping curtains of rain. Then the days shortened; things cooled and dried.

Water started to come out of the wells muddy; we filtered it. The grass started to go crisp. There was perhaps a month or two of moisture left in the ground. Our children neared the end of their first year, worthy of

the name foal.

Except for Leveza's. Kaway lay there like an egg after all these months. He could just about move his eyes. Almost absurdly, Leveza loved him as if he were whole and well.

"You are a miracle," she said to Kaway. People called him the Lump. She would look at him, her face all dim with love, and she would say her fabricated things. She would look at me rapt with wonder.

"What if he knows what the Ancestors knew? We know about cogs and gears and motors and circuits. What if Kaway is born knowing about electricity? About medicine and machines? What he might tell us!"

She told him stories and the stories went like this.

The Ancestors so loved the animals that when the world was dying, they took them into themselves. They made extra seeds for them, hidden away in their own to carry us safely inside themselves, all the animals they most loved.

The sickness came, and the only way for them to escape was to let the seeds grow. And so we flowered out of them; the sickness was strong, and they disappeared.

Leveza looked down at her little ancestral lump. Some of us would have left such a burden out on the plain for the Cats or the Dogs or the scavenging oroobos. But not Leveza. She could carry anything.

I think Leveza loved everyone. Everyone, in this devouring world. And that's why what happened, happened.

* * * *

The pampas near the camp went bald in patches, where the old and weak had overgrazed it. Without realizing, we began to prepare.

The babysquirrels gathered metal nuts. The bugs in their tummies made them from rust in the ground. The old uncles would smelt them for knives, rifle barrels, and bullets. Leveza asked them to make some rods.

She heated them and bent them backward and Grama looked at them and asked, "What kind of rifle is that going to make, one that shoots backward?"

“It’s for Kaway,” Leveza replied. She cut off her mane for fabric. I cut mine as well, and to our surprise, so did Grama.

Leveza wove a saddle for her back, so the baby could ride.

Once Grama had always played the superior high-ranker, bossy and full of herself. “Oh Leveza how clever. What a good idea.” And then, “I’m sorry what I said, earlier.” She slipped Leveza’s inert mushroom of a boy into the saddle.

Grama had become kind.

Grama being respectful about Leveza and Kaway set a fashion for appreciating who my groom-mate was. Nobody asked me anymore why on Earth I was with her. When the Head Man Fortchee began talking regularly to her about migration defenses, a wave of gossip convulsed the herd. Could Leveza become the Head Mare? Was the Lump really Fortchee’s son?

“She’s always been so smart, so brave,” said Ventoo.

“More like a man,” said Lindalfa, with a wrench of a smile.

* * * *

One morning, the Head Man whinnied over and over and trod the air with his forelegs.

Triggered.

Migration.

We took down the pavilions and the windbreaks and stacked the grass-leaf panels in carts. We loaded all our tools and pipes and balls and blankets, and most precious of all, the caked and blackened foundries. The camp’s babysquirrels lined up, and chattered goodbye to us, as if they really cared. Everyone nurtured the squirrels, and used them as they use us; even Cats will never eat them.

It started out a fine migration. Oats lined the length of the trail. As we ate, we scattered oat seed behind us, to replace it. Shit, oat seed, and inside the shit, flakes of plastic our bellies made, but there were no squirrels to gather it.

It did not rain, but the watering holes and rivers stayed full. It was sunny but not so hot that flies tormented us.

In bad years your hide never stops twitching because you can't escape the stench of Cat piss left to dry on the ground. That year the ground had been washed and the air was calm and sweet.

We saw no Cats. Dogs, we saw Dogs, but fat and jolly Dogs stuffed to the brim with quail and partridge which Cats don't eat. "Lovely weather!" the Dogs called to us, tongues hanging out, grins wide, and we whinnied back, partly in relief. We can see off Dogs, except when they come in packs.

Leveza walked upright the whole time, gun at the ready, Kaway strapped to her back.

"Leveza," I said, "You'll break your back! Use your palmhoofs!"

She grunted. "Any Cat comes near our babies, and it will be one sorry Cat!"

"What Cats? We've seen none."

"They depend on the migrations. We've missed one. They will be very, very hungry."

Our first attack came the next day. I thought it had started to rain; there was just a hissing in the grass, and I turned and I saw old Alez; I saw her eyes rimmed with white, the terror stare. I didn't even see the four Cats that gripped her legs.

Fortchee brayed a squealing sound of panic. Whoosh, we all took off. I jumped into a gallop, I can tell you, no control or thought; I was away; all I wanted was the rush of grass under my hands.

Then I heard a shot and I turned back and I saw Leveza, all alone, standing up, rifle leveled. A Cat was spinning away from Alez, as if it were a spring-pasture caper. The other Cats stared. Leveza fired again once more and they flickered like fire and were gone. Leveza flung herself flat onto the grass just before a crackling like tindersticks come out of the long grass.

The Cats had guns too.

Running battle.

“Down down!” I shouted to the foals. I galloped toward them. “Just! Get! Flat!” I jumped on top them, ramming them down into the dirt. They wailed in panic and fear. “Get off me! Get off me!” My little Choova started to cry. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

I was all teeth. “What did we tell you about an attack? You run and when the gunfire starts you flatten. What did I say! What did I say?”

Gunsmoke drifted; the dry grass sparkled with shot, our nostrils shivered from the smell of burning.

Cats prefer to pounce first, get one of us down, and have the rest of us gallop away. They know if they fire first, they’re more likely to be shot themselves.

The fire from our women was fierce, determined, and constant. We soon realized that the only gunfire we heard was our own and that the Cats had slunk away.

The children still wailed, faces crumpled, tears streaming. Their crying just made us grumpy. Well, we all thought, it’s time they learned. “You stupid children. What did you think this was, a game?”

Grama was as hard as any granny. “Do you want to be torn to pieces and me have to watch it happen? Do you think you can say to a Cat very nicely please don’t eat me and that will stop them?”

Leveza was helping Alez to stand. Her old groom-mother’s legs kept giving way, and she was grinning a wide rictus grin. She looked idiotic.

“Come on love, that’s it.” Leveza eased Alez toward Pronto’s cart.

“What are you doing?” Pronto said, glaring at her.

“She’s in no fit state to walk.”

“You mean, I’m supposed to haul her?”

“I know you’d much rather leave her to be eaten, but no thanks, not just this once.”

Somehow, more like a goat than a Horse, Alez nipped up into the

wagon. Leveza strode back toward us, still on her hind legs.

The children shivered and sobbed. Leveza strode up to us. And then did something new.

“Aw, babies,” she said, in a stricken tone I had never heard before. She dropped down on four haunches next to them. “Oh darlings!” She caressed their backs, laying her jaw on the napes of their necks. “It shouldn’t be like this, I know. It is terrible, I know. But we are the only thing they have to eat.”

“Mummy shouted at me! She was mean.”

“That’s because Mummy was so worried and so frightened for you. She was scared because you didn’t know what it was and didn’t know what to do. Mummy was so frightened that she would lose you.”

“The Cats eat us!”

“And the crocodiles in the river. And there are wolves, a kind of Dog. We don’t get many here, they are on the edge of the snows in the forests. Here, we get the Cats.”

Leveza pulled back their manes and breathed into their nostrils. “It shouldn’t be like this.”

Should or shouldn’t, we thought, that’s how it is. Why waste energy wishing it wasn’t?

We’d forgotten, you see, that it was a choice, a choice that in the end was ours. Not my Leveza.

The Head Man came up, and his voice was also gentle with the colts and fillies. “Come on, kids. The Cats will be back. We need to move away from here.”

He had to whinny to get us moving; he even back-kicked the reluctant Pronto. Alez sat up in the cart looking cross-eyed and beside herself with delight at being carried.

“Store and dry cud,” Fortchee told us.

Cudcakes. How I hate cudcakes. You chew them and spit them out on the carts to dry and you always think you’ll remember where yours are

and you always end up eating someone else's mash of grass and spit.

Leveza walked next to the Head Man, looking at maps, murmuring and tossing her mane toward the east. I saw them make up their minds about something.

I even felt a little tail-flick of jealousy. When she came back, I said a bit sharply. "What was that all about?"

Leveza sounded almost pleased. "Don't tell the others. We're being stalked."

"What?"

"Must be slim pickings. The Cats have left their camp. They've got their cubs with them. They're following us." She sighed, her eyes on the horizon. "It's a nuisance. They think they can herd us. There'll be some kind of trap set ahead, so we've decided to change our route."

We turned directly east. The ground started to rise, toward the hills, where an age-old trail goes through a pass. Rocks began to break through a mat of thick grasses. The slope steepened, and each of the carts needed two big men to haul it up.

The trail followed valleys between high rough humps of ground, dovetailing with small streams cut deeply into the grass. We could hear the water, like thousands of tongues lapping on stone. The most important thing on a migration is to get enough to drink. The water in the streams was delicious, cold and tasting of rocks, not mud.

My name means water, but I think I must taste of mud.

We found ourselves in a new world, looking out on waves of earth, rising and falling and going blue in the distance. On the top of distant ridge a huge rock stuck out, with a rounded dome like a skull.

Fortchee announced. "We need to make that rock by evening." It was already early afternoon, and everyone groaned.

"Or you face the Cats out here on open ground," he said.

"Come on, you're wasting breath," said Leveza and strode on.

The ground was strange; a deep rich black smelling deliciously of

grass and leaves, and it thumped underfoot with a hollow sound like a drum. We grazed as we marched, tearing up the grass, and pulling up with it mouthfuls of soil, good to eat but harsh, hard to digest. It made us fart, pungently, and in each others faces as we marched. “No need for firefighters!” the old women giggled.

In places the trail had washed away, leaving tumbles of boulders that the carts would creak up and over, dropping down on the other side with a worrying crash. Leveza stomped on, still on two legs, gun ready. She would spring up rocks, heel-hooves clattering and skittering on stone. Sure-footed she wasn't. She did not hop nimbly, but she was relentless.

“They're still here,” she muttered to me. All of us wanted our afternoon kip, but Fortchee wouldn't let us. The sun dropped, the shadows lengthened. Everything glowed orange. This triggered fear—low light means you must find safe camping. We snorted, and grew anxious.

Down one hill and up the other: it was sunset, the worst time for us, when we arrived at the skull rock. We don't like stone either.

“We sleep up there,” Fortchee said. He had a fight on his hands. We had never heard of such a thing.

“What, climb up that? We'll split our hooves. Or tear our fingers,” said Ventoo.

“And leave everything behind in the wagons?” yelled one of the men.

“It'll be windy and cold.”

Fortchee tossed his head. “We'll keep each other warm.”

“We'll fall off....”

“Don't be a load of squirrels,” said Leveza. She went to a cart, picked up a bag of tools, and started to climb.

Fortchee amplified, “Take ammo, all the guns.”

“What about the foundries?”

He sighed. “We'll need to leave those.”

By some miracle, the dome had a worn hole in the top full of rainwater

and we drank. We had our kip, but the Head Man wouldn't let us go down to graze. It got dark and we had another sleep, two hours or more. But you can't sleep all night.

I was woken up by a stench of Cat that seemed to shriek in my nostrils. I heard Leveza sounding annoyed. "Tuh!" she said, "Dear oh dear!" Louder than a danger call—bam!—a gun blast, followed by the yelp of a Cat. Then the other *afriradors* opened fire. The children whinnied in terror. Peering down into milklight I could see a heaving tide of Cat pulling back from the rock. They even made a sound like water, the scratching of claws on stone.

"What fun," said Leveza.

I heard Grama trying not to giggle. Safety and strength came off Leveza's hide like a scent.

She turned to Fortchee. "Do you think we should go now or wait here?"

"Well, we can't wait until after sunrise, that'll slow us down too much. Now."

Leveza really was acting like Head Mare, and there had not been one of those in a while. She was climbing into the highest status. Not altogether hindered by having, if I may say so, a high-class groom-mate.

The *afriradors* sent out continual shots to drive back the last of the Cats. Then we skittered down the face of the rock back toward the wagons.

At the base of the cliff, a Cat lay in a pool of blood, purring, eyes closed as if asleep. Lindalfa scream-whinnied in horror and clattered backward. The Cat rumbled but did not stir.

Muttering, fearful, we were all pushed back by Cat-stench; we twitched and began to circle just before panic.

Leveza leaned in close to stare.

"Love, come away," I said. I picked my way forward, ready to grab her neck and pull her back if the thing lunged. I saw its face in milklight.

I'd never seen a Cat up close before.

The thing that struck me was that she was handsome. It was a finely formed face, despite the short muzzle, with a divided upper lip which seemed almost to smile, the mouthful of fangs sheathed. The Cat's expression looked simply sad, as if she were asking Life itself one last question.

Leveza sighed and said, "Poor heart."

The beast moaned, a low miserable sound that shook the earth. "You ... need ... predators."

"Like cat-shit we do," said Leveza, and stood up and back. "Come on!" she called to the rest of us, as if we were the ones who had been laggard.

* * * *

The Cats were clever. They had pulled out far ahead of us so we had no idea when they would attack again. Our hooves slipped on the rocks. Leveza went all hearty on us. "Goats do this sort of thing. They have hooves too."

"They're cloven," said one of the bucks.

"Nearly cousins," sniffed Leveza. I think the light, the air, and the view so far above the plain exhilarated her. It depressed me. I wanted to be down there where it was flat and you could run and it was full of grass. The men hauling the wagons never stopped frothing, eyes edged white. They were trapped in yokes and that made them easy prey.

We hated being strung out along the narrow trail, and kept hanging back so we could gather together in clumps. She would stomp on ahead and stomp on back. "Come on, everyone, while it's still dark."

"We're just waiting for the others," quailed Lindalfa.

"No room for the others, love, not on this path."

Lindalfa sounded harassed. "Well, I don't like being exposed like this."

"No, you'd far rather have all your friends around you to be eaten first." It was a terrible thing to say, but absolutely true. Some of us laughed.

Sunrise came, the huge white sky contrasting too much with the silhouetted earth so that we could see nothing. We waited it out in a defensive group, carts around us. As soon as the sun rose high enough, Leveza triggered us to march. Not Fortchee. She urged us on and got us moving, and went ahead to scout. I learned something new about my groom-mate: the most loyal and loving of us was also the one who could most stand being alone.

She stalked on ahead, and I remember seeing the Lump sitting placidly on her back, about as intelligent as a cudcake.

A high wind stroked the grass in waves. Beautiful clouds were piled up overhead, full of wheeling birds, scavengers who were neither hunters nor victims. They knew nothing of ancestors or even speech.

Then we heard over the brow of a hill the snarl of Cats who have gone for the kill and no longer need stealth.

Leveza. Ahead. Alone.

“Gotcha!” they roared in thunder-voices.

We heard gunfire, just a snapping like a twig, and a Cat yelp, and then more gunfire and after that a heartfelt wail that could not have come from a Cat, a long hideous keening, more like that of a bird.

Fortchee broke into a lurching, struggling gallop. He triggered me and I jumped forward into a gallop too, slipping on rocks, heaving my way up the slope. It was like a nightmare where something keeps pulling you back. I heaved myself up onto the summit and saw Leveza, sitting on the ground, Fortchee stretching down to breathe into her ears.

She was staring ahead. Fortchee looked up at me with such sadness.

Before he could speak, Leveza turned her heavy jaws, her great snout toward the sky and mourned, whinnying now a note for the dead.

“They got the Lump,” said the Head Man, and turned and rubbed her shoulders. Her saddle-pack was torn. The baby was gone. Leveza keened, rocking from side to side, her lips forming a circle, the sound coming from far back and down her throat.

“Leveza,” said Fortchee, looking forlornly at me.

“Leveza,” I agreed, for we knew that she would not forget Kaway soon.

The rest of us, we lose a child, we have another next year; we don’t think about it; we can’t afford to. We’re not strong enough. They die, child after child, and the old beloved aunties, or the wise old men who can no longer leap away. We can hear them being eaten. “Remember me! I love you!” they call to us, heartbroken to be leaving life and leaving us. But we have to forget them.

So we go brittle and shallow, sweet and frightened, smart but dishonest.

Not Leveza. She suddenly snarled, snatched up her rifle, rocked to her feet, and galloped off, after the Cats.

“She can’t think that she can get him back!” I said.

“I don’t know what she can think,” said Fortchee.

The others joined us and we all stood haunches pressed together. None of us went to help, not even me, her beloved groom-mate. You do not chase prides of Cats to rescue anyone. You accept that they have been taken.

We heard distant shots, and the yelping of Cats. We heard hooves.

“She’s coming back,” whispered Grama and glanced at me. It was as if the hills themselves had stood up to stretch to see if things looked any different. A Horse had been hunting Cats.

Leveza appeared again at the top of the hill and for a moment I thought she had wrought a miracle, for her child dangled from her mouth.

Then I saw the way she swayed when she walked, the dragging of her hooves. She baby-carried a tiny torn head and red bones hanging together by tendons and scraps of skin. Suddenly she just sat on the ground and renewed her wailing. She arched her head round and looked down at herself in despair. Her breasts were seeping milk.

She tried to make the bones drink. She pushed the fragments of child onto her dugs. I cantered to her, lost my footing, and collapsed next to her. “Leveza. Love. Let him be.”

She shouted up into my face with unseeing eyes. "What am I supposed to do with him?"

"Oh Leveza," I started to weep for her. "You feel things too much."

"I'm not leaving him!"

You're supposed to walk away. You're supposed to leave them to the birds and then to the sun and then to the rains until they wash back into the earth.

To come again as grass. We eat our grandmothers, in the grass. It shows acceptance, good will toward the world to forget quickly.

Leveza began to tear at the thin pelt of ground that covered the rocks. She gouged at it, skinning her forefingers, broke open the sod, and peeled it back. She laid the scraps on the bare rock, and gently covered what was left of him as if with a blanket. She tucked him in and began to sing a soft milklight song to him.

It simply was not bearable. If a child dies through sickness you take it away from camp, and let the birds and insects get to it. Then later you dance on the bones, to break them up into dust to show scorn for the body and the heart to accept fate.

The Head Man came back, and bumped her with his snout. "Up, Leveza. We must keep moving."

Leveza stroked the ground. "Good night Kaway. Sleep Kaway. Grow like a seed. Become beautiful Kaway grass."

We muttered and murmured. We'd all lost people we love like that. Why should she keen and carry on, why should she be different?

"I know it's hard," said Lindalfa. Unspoken was the "but."

Love can't be that special. Love must not cost that much. You'll learn, Leveza, I thought, like all the others. You'll finally learn.

I was looking down at her in some kind of triumph, proved right, when Leveza stood up, and turned everything upside down again.

She shook the tears out of her eyes and then walked away from me, shouldering past Fortchee as if he were an encumbrance. Tamely we

trooped after her. She went to a wagon and reloaded her gun. She started to troop back down the hill in the direction of the rock.

“That’s the wrong way, isn’t it?”

“What’s she doing?”

Fortchee called after her, and when she didn’t answer, he looked deeply at me and said. “Follow her.”

I whinnied for her to wait and started to trot down the hill.

Her determined stomp became a canter, then, explosively a kind of leaping, runaway gallop, thundering slipshod over stones and grass, threatening to break a leg. I chortled the slow-down cry but that checked her only for a moment. At the foot of the Rock she slid to a halt, raising dust.

She leveled her gun at the head of the wounded Cat. A light breeze seemed to blow her words to me up the slope. “Why do we need predators?”

The Cat groaned, its eyes still shut. “The Ancestors destroyed the world.”

I reached them. “Leveza, come away,” I nickered.

The Cat swallowed heavily. “They killed predators.” All her words seemed to start with a growl.

Leveza went very still, I flanked her, and kept saying, leave her, come away. Suddenly she pushed the gun at me. “Shoot her if she moves.”

I hated guns. I thought they would explode in my hands, or knock me backward. I knew carrying a gun made you a target. I didn’t want the gun; I wanted to get us back to safety. I whinnied in fear.

She pushed on back up the hill, “I’m coming back,” she said over her shoulder. I was alone with a Cat.

“Just kill me,” said the Cat. The air was black with her blood; everything in me buzzed and went numb. Overhead the scavengers spiraled and I was sure at any moment other Cats would come. Climb the Rock! I told myself, but I couldn’t move. I looked up at the trail.

Finally, finally Leveza came back with another gun and a coil of rope.

“Don’t you ever do that to me again!” I sobbed.

She looked ferocious, her mane bristling, teeth smiling to bite out flesh. “You want to live, you put up with this,” she said. I thought she said it to me.

“What are you fabricating now?” I hated her then, always having to surprise.

She bound the Cat’s front paws together, and then the back, and then tied all four limbs to the animal’s trunk. Leveza seized the mouth; I squealed and she began to wrap the snout round and round with rope. Blood seeped in woven patterns through the cord. The Cat groaned and rolled her eyes.

Then, oh then, Leveza sat on the ground and rolled the Cat onto her own back. She reached round and turned it so that it was folded sideways over her. Then she turned to me. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance of you giving me a hand?”

I said nothing. All of this was so unheard of that it triggered nothing, not even fear.

Slowly, forelegs first, Leveza stood up under the weight of the Cat. The Cat growled and dug in those great claws, but that just served to hold her in place. Burdened, Leveza began to climb the hill, her back beginning to streak with blood. I looked up. Everyone was bunched together on the brow of the ridge. I had no words, I forgot all words. I just climbed.

As we drew near, the entire herd, every last one of them including her groom-mother Alez formed a wall of lowered heads. *Go back, get away.* I think it was for the Cat, but it felt as if it were for us. Leveza kept coming. Hides started to twitch from the smell of Cat blood carried on the wind. Leveza ignored them and plodded on. The men had also come back with the carts. Old Pronto in harness tried to move sideways in panic and couldn’t.

“Think,” she told him. “For a change.”

He whinnied and danced in place on the verge of bolting with one of our main wagons.

“Oh for heaven’s sake!” She plucked out the pin of his yoke with her

teeth and he darted away, the yoke still on his shoulders. He trotted to a halt, and then stood there looking sheepish.

Leveza rolled the Cat onto the wagon, tools clanking under the body. Brisk and business-like, she picked up pliers, and began to pull out, one by one, all of the Cat's claws.

The poor beast groaned, roared, and shivered, rocking her head and trying to bite despite her jaws being tied shut. The Cat flexed her bloodied hands and feet but she no longer had claws. It seemed to take forever as the air whispered about us.

Undirected, all of us just stared.

When it was over, the Cat lay flat, panting. Leveza then took more rope, tied it tight 'round the predator's neck, lashing the other end to the yoke fittings. She then unwound the rope from her jaws. The Cat roared and rocked in place; her huge green fangs smelling of blood. Leveza took a hammer and chisel, and began to break all the Cat's teeth.

Fortchee stepped forward. "Leveza. Stop. This is cruel."

"But necessary or she'll eat us."

"Why are you doing this? It won't bring Kaway back."

She turned and looked at him, the half wheel of her lower jaw swollen. "To learn from her."

"Learn what?"

"What she knows."

"We have to get moving," said the Head Man.

"Exactly," she said, with flat certainty. "That's why she's in the cart."

"You're taking her with us?" Everything on Fortchee bristled, from his mane to his handsome goatee.

She stood there, and I think I remember her smiling. "You won't be able to stop me."

The entire herd made a noise in unison, a kind of horrified, wondering

sigh.

She turned to me with airy unconcern and asked. "Do you think you could get me the yoke?"

Pronto tossed it at her with his head. "Here, have it, demented woman!"

I started to weep. "Leveza, this won't bring him back. Come, love, let it be, leave her alone and let's go."

She looked at me with pity. "Poor Akwa."

* * * *

Leveza pulled the wagon herself. Women are supposed to carry guns; men haul the wagon, two of them together if it is uphill.

I tried to walk with her. No one else could bear to go near the prickling stench of Cat. It made me weep and cough. "I can't stay."

"It's all right, love," she said. "Go to the others, you'll feel safer."

"You'll be alone with that thing."

"She's preoccupied."

Unable to imagine what else to do, I left.

We migrated on. All through that long day, Fortchee did not let us sleep, and we could sometimes hear Leveza behind us, tormenting the poor animal with questions.

"No," we heard her shout. "It's not instinct. You can choose not to eat other people!"

The Cat roared and groaned. "Sometimes there is nothing else to eat! Do you want us to let our children die?"

Leveza roared back. "Why take my baby then? There was no...." She whinnied loud in horror, and snorted in fury. "There was no meat on him!"

The Cat groaned. She was talking, but we couldn't hear what she said. Leveza went silent, plodding on alone, listening to the Cat. She fell far

behind even the rear guard of *afiradors* who were supposed to protect stragglers. Already it was slightly as though she did not exist.

The light settled low and orange, the shadows grew long. I kept craning behind us but by then I could neither see nor hear Leveza.

“They’ll attack her! She’ll be taken!” I nickered constantly to Grama.

She laid her head on my neck as we walked. “If anyone can stand alone against Cats, it’s her.”

We found no outcropping. On top of a hill with a good view all around, Fortchee lifted himself up and trod the air, whinnying. The men in the carts turned left and circled. “Windbreaks!” called the Head Man. We all began to unload windbreak timbers, to slot down the sides of the carts, to make a fortress. I kept looking back for Leveza.

Finally she appeared in the smoky dusk hauling the Cat. Froth had dried on her neck. She looked exhausted; her head dipped as if chastened.

Fortchee stepped in front of her. “You can’t come into the circle with that cart.”

She halted. Burrs and bracken had got tangled in her mane. She stared at the ground. “She’s tied up. She’s very weak.”

Fortchee snorted in anger and pawed the dirt. “Do you think anybody could sleep with a Cat stinking up the inside of the circle?”

She paused, blinked. “She says the other Cats will kill her.”

“Let them!” said Fortchee.

Without answering, Leveza turned and hauled the cart away from the camp. Fortchee froze, looked at her, and then said, “Akwa, see to your groom-mate.”

Something in that made Grama snort, and she came with me. As we walked toward the carts, we pressed together the whole length of our bodies from shoulder to haunch for comfort.

Grama said, “She’s reliving what happened to Grassa.”

“Grassa?”

“Her mother. She saw her eaten, remember?”

“Oh yes, sorry.” I did the giggle, the giggle you give to excuse forgetting, the forgetting of the dead out of embarrassment and the need to keep things light. “Anyway,” I said, “you made things hard enough for her when she was young.”

Grama hung her head. “I know.” Grama had tried to bully Leveza until she’d head-butted her, though two years younger.

It’s not good to remember.

Leveza had already climbed up into the cart, without having watered or grazed. Her eyes flicked back and forth between me and Grama. “Grama, of course, how sensible. Here.” She threw something at me and without thinking I caught it in my mouth. It was a bullet, thick with Cat blood and I spat it out.

“Fortchee wouldn’t thank you for that. He’s always telling us to save metal. Grama, love, do you think you could bring us bark-water, pain killers, thread?”

Grama’s hide twitched, but she said, “Yes, of course.”

Leveza reached around and tossed her a gun. “Watch yourself. I’ll keep my gun ready too.”

Grama picked up the bullet, then trotted back through the dusk. I felt undefended but I could not get up into the wagon with that thing. Leveza stood on hindquarters, scanning the camp, her gun leveled. As Grama came back with a pack, Leveza’s nostrils moved as if about to speak.

“They’re here,” she said.

Grama clambered up into the cart. I couldn’t see the Cat behind the sideboards, but I could see Grama’s eyes flare open, her mane bristle. Even so, she settled on her rear haunches and began to work, dabbing the wounds. I could hear the Cat groan, deep enough to shake the timber of the cart.

Leveza’s tail began to flick. I could smell it now: Cat all around us, scent blowing up the hillside like ribbons. The sunset was full of fire, clouds the color of flowers. Calmly Grama sewed the wound. Leveza eased

herself down, eyes still on the pasture, to feel if Grama's gun was loaded.

"Her name's Mai, by the way," said Leveza. Mai meant Mother in both tongues.

The Cat made a noise like *Rergurduh*, Rigadoo. Thanks.

Leveza nickered a gentle safety call to me. I jumped forward, and then stopped. The smell of Cat was a wall.

"Get up into the cart," said Leveza in a slow mothering voice.

It was the Terrible Time, when we can't see. Milklight fills the night, but when the sky blazes and the earth is black, the contrast means we can see nothing. Leveza reached down, bit my neck to help haul me up.

I was only halfway into the cart when out of that darkness a deep rumble formed words. "We will make the Horses eat you first."

Leveza let me go to shriek out the danger call, to tell the others. I tried to kick my way into the cart.

"Then while you cry we will take their delicious legs."

I felt claws rake the back of my calves. I screamed and scrambled. A blast right by my ears deafened me; I pulled myself in; I smelt dust in the air.

Leveza. How could she see? How could she walk upright all day?

She touched a tar lamp, opened its vent, and it gave light. "Aim for eyes," she said.

We saw yellow eyes, narrow and glowing, pure evil, hypnotizing. Ten, fifteen, how many were there, trying to scramble into the wagon?

Gramma shot. Leveza shot. I had no gun and yearned to run so stamped my feet and cried for help. Some of the eyes closed and spun away. I looked at Mother Cat. She had folded up, eyes closed, but I was maddened and began to kick her as if she threatened my child. The sun sank.

Finally we heard a battle cry and a thundering of hooves from the circle. Leveza bit my neck and threw me to the floor of the cart. My nostrils

were pushed into a pool of Cat juices. I heard shots and metal singing through the air. Our mares were firing wildly at anything. Why couldn't they see?

"Put that lamp out!" shouted Fortchee. Leveza stretched forward and flicked it shut. Then in milklight, our *afiradors* took more careful aim. I felt rather than heard a kind of thumping rustle, bullets in flesh, feet through grass. I peered out over the sides of the wagon and in milklight, I saw the Cats pulling back, slipping up and over rocks, crouching behind them. I lay back down and looked at Mother Cat. She shivered, her eyes screwed shut. A Cat felt fear?

We could still smell them, we could still hear them.

Fortchee said, "All of you, back into the circle. You too, Leveza."

She snuffled from weariness. "Can't!"

I cried, "Leveza! Those are real Cats, they will come back! What you care about her?"

"I did this to her," Leveza said.

Fortchee asked, "Why do other Cats want to kill her?"

A deep voice next to me purred through broken teeth. "Dissh-honour."

Chilled, everyone fell silent.

"Alsho, I talk too much," said Mother Cat. Did she chuckle?

I pleaded. "Choova misses you; she wants her groom-mummy; I miss you; please, Leveza, come back!" Fortchee ordered the men to give her a third gun and some ammo.

Grama looked at me with a question in her eyes I didn't want to see. As far as I was concerned, Fortchee had told us to pull back. I was shaking inside. Grama wasn't the one who had felt claws on her haunches.

All the way back, Grama bit the back of my neck as if carrying me like a mother.

We nestled down under a wagon behind the windbreak walls. Choova

worked her way between us. None of us could sleep even the two hours. We paced and pawed. I stood up and looked out, and saw Leveza standing on watch, unfaltering.

At dawnsky when she would have most difficulty seeing, I heard shots, repeated. I fought my way out from under the wagon, and jerked my head over the windbreak between the carts where there are only timbers.

Blank whiteness, blank darkness, and in the middle a lamp glowing like a second sunrise. I could see nothing except swirling smoke and yellow dust and Leveza hunching behind the sides of the wagon, suddenly nipping up to shoot. Someone else glowed orange in that light, firing from the other side.

Leveza had given a gun to the Cat.

I saw leaping arms fanning what looked like knives. Everything spiraled in complete silence. The Cats made no sound at all. I was still rearing up my head over the windbreak to look, when suddenly, in complete silence, a Cat's head launched itself at my face. All I saw was snout, yellow eyes, fangs in a blur jammed up close to me. I leapt back behind the windbreak; the thing roared, a paralyzing sound that froze me. I could feel it make me go numb. The numbness takes away the pain as they eat you.

I couldn't think for a long time after that. I stood there shaking, gradually becoming aware of my pounding heart. Others were up, had begun to work; the sun was high; dawnsky was over. I heard Choova call me, but I couldn't answer. She galloped out to me, crying and weeping. Grama followed, looked concerned, and then began to trot.

It showed in my face. "Did one of them get in here?" she asked.

I couldn't answer, just shook my head, no. Choova cried, frightened for me. "It climbed the wall," I said and realized I'd been holding my breath.

"Leveza's not in the wagon," said Grama. We reared up to look over the wall. The slope was grassy, wide, the day bright. The wagon stood alone, with nothing visible in it. Grama looked at me.

Maybe she'd gone to graze? I scanned the fields, and caught motion from the slopes behind me, turned and my heart shivered with relief. There was Leveza slowly climbing toward us.

"What's she doing down there, that's where the Cats are!"

She held something in her mouth. For moment I thought she'd gone back again for Kaway. Then I saw feathers. Birds? As she lowered herself, they swayed limply.

"She's been hunting," said Grama.

"She's gone mad," I said.

"I fear so."

We told Choova to stay where she was and Grama and I trotted out to meet her. "Is that what I think it is? Is it?" I shouted at her. I was weepier than I would normally be, shaken.

Leveza reared up and took the dead quail out of her mouth. "She needs to eat something," said Leveza. She was in one of her hearty, blustering moods, cheerful about everything and unstoppable. She strode on two legs. She'd braided her mane and then held it on top of her head with plastic combs, out of her eyes.

Grama sighed. "We don't take life, Leveza. We value it."

She looked merry. She shook the quail. "I value thought. These things can't think."

"That's a horrible thing to say!"

She swept past us. "You'd rather she ate us, I suppose. Or maybe you want her to die. How does that show you value life?"

She trooped on toward the cart.

Grama had an answer. "I'd rather the Cat hunted for herself."

"Good. I'll give her a gun then."

I was furious. "She had a gun last night!"

"Oh. Yes. Well. She was a welcome addition to our resources." Leveza smiled. "Since I was otherwise on my own." She looked at me dead in the eye and her meaning was plain enough.

"If they value life so much, why did they take Kaway then?" I was sorry

the instant I said it. I meant that I'd heard her ask the Cat that and I wanted to know the answer too, just like she did.

"Because I broke the bargain," she said, so calmly that I was almost frightened.

I wanted to show her that I was outraged at what they'd done. "What bargain?"

She lost some kind of patience. "Oh come on, Akwa, you're not a child. The bargain! The one where they don't take children so they grow up nice and fat for them to eat later and we let them take our old and sick. They get to eat, and we get rid of people whose only use is that they are experienced and wise, something Horses can't use, because of course we know everything already. So we don't shoot Cats except to scare them off, and they don't shoot us." Her eyes looked like the Cats' reflecting our lamps. "*That* bargain."

"I ... I'm sorry."

"I shot them when they took the old. They saw I was the leader so I was the target."

Grama and I looked at each other. Grama said, with just a hint of a smile, "You ...?"

"Yes me. The Cats can see it even if you can't."

Grama pulled back her lips as if to say, oops, pushed her too far that time. As we followed her Grama butted me gently with her head. *It's just Leveza fabricating.*

Leveza strode ahead of us, as if she didn't need us, and it was uncomfortably like she didn't.

Once at the cart, Leveza took out a knife and began to butcher the quail. I cried and turned away. She pushed the meat toward the Cat, who opened her eyes but did not move. The creature had had to relieve herself in the cart so the stink was worse than ever.

Leveza dropped onto all fours and trotted to the neck of the cart. "Help me into the yoke?"

"You've not asked me about Choova."

“How is she?” She picked up the yoke by herself.

“Terrified and miserable. She saw the empty cart and thought you were dead.”

Grama helped settle the yoke, slipping in the pin. At once Leveza started to drag the cart forward

“You’re going now?” The camp was not even being dismantled.

“Stragglers get taken. Today I intend to be in front. We start going downhill.”

“Let’s go!” I said to Grama, furious, but she shook her head and walked on beside the cart. “I’ve got a gun,” she said. “We should guard her.”

I should have gone back to take care of Choova, but it felt wrong somehow to leave someone else guarding my groom-mate. I shouted to Choova as we passed the camp. “Groom-mummy is fine, darling; we’re just going with her to make sure she’s safe.”

So all of us walked together, the cart jostling and thinking over rocks.

“So tell them, Mai. Why does the world need predators?”

I looked into the wagon, and saw that the Cat had clenched about herself like fingers curled up inside a hoof. I could sense waves of illness coming of her. I saw the horrible meat. She hadn’t touched it. She looked at me with dead eyes.

“Go on, Mai; explain!”

The Cat forced herself to talk, and rolled onto her back, submissively.

“*‘ere wasssh a ribber...*” she said, toothlessly. “There was a river and there were many goats and many wolves to eat them.” Her voice sounded comic. Everything came out sssh wvuh and boub, like the voices we adopt when we tell jokes. “*Verh whuh whvolbss ...* there were wolves, and the Ancestors killed all the wolves because they were predators.”

It was exactly as though she were telling a funny story. I was triggered. I started to laugh.

“And then the rivers started to die. With nothing to eat them, there were too many goats and they ate all the new trees that held the banks together.”

I shook my head to get rid of the laughter. I trembled inside from fear. I wanted to wee.

The Cat groaned. “Issh nop a zhope!” *It’s not a joke.*

Leveza craned her neck back, looking as though she was teaching me a lesson, her eyes glinting at me in a strange look of triumph and wonder. “What Memory Sticks do Cats have?”

“We know about the seeds, the seeds inside us.”

Grama’s ears stood straight up.

Leveza’s words kept pace with her heavy feet, as if nothing could ever frighten her or hurry her. “Cats know how Ancestors and beasts mingled. They understand how life is made. We could split us up again, Horse and Ancestor. We could give them something else to eat.”

It was all too much for me, as if the Earth were turning in the wind. I was giddy.

Grama marched head bowed, looking thoughtful. “So ... you know what the other peoples know?”

Leveza actually laughed aloud too. “She does! She does!”

“What do Dogs know?” Grama asked.

The Cat kept telling what sounded like jokes. “Things that are not alive are made of seeds too. Rocks and air and water are all made of tiny things. Dogs know all about those.”

“And goats?”

“Ah! Goats know how the universe began.”

“And electricity?” Grama actually stepped closer to the Cat. “Everything we know is useless without electricity.”

“Bovines,” said the Cat. “I’ve never seen one. But I’ve heard. You go south and you know you are there because they have lights that glow with electricity!”

“We could make a new kind of herd,” Leveza said. “A herd of all the peoples that joins together. We could piece it all together, all that knowledge.”

The Cat rolled on her belly and covered her eyes. Grama looked at her and at me, and we thought the same thing. Wounded, no food, no water—I felt nausea, the Cat’s sickness in my own belly. Why didn’t Leveza?

Grama said, almost as if defending the Cat. “We’d have to all stay together though, all the time. All of us mixed. Or we’d forget it all.”

The Cat rumbled. “The Bears have something called writing. It records. But only the big white ones in the south.”

“Really!” Leveza said. “If we could do that, we could send knowledge everywhere.”

“I’ve thought that,” the Cat said quietly. “Calling all of us together. But my people would eat them all.”

It was one of those too-bright days that cloud over, but for now, the sun dazzled.

“The dolphins in the sea,” murmured the Cat as if dreaming. “They know how stars are made and stay in the sky. They use them to navigate.”

Sun and wind.

“Sea turtles understand all the different elements, how to mix them.”

Grama said, “She needs water.”

Leveza sniffed. “We’ve crossed a watershed. We’re going downhill; there’ll be a stream soon.” We marched on, toward cauliflower clouds.

Grama and I took over pulling the wagon for a time. I don’t know what hauling it uphill is like, but going downhill, the whole weight of it pushes into your shoulders and your legs go rubbery pushing back to stop it rolling out of control.

It's worrying being yoked: you can't run as fast; you're trapped with the cart. I looked back 'round and saw Leveza in the cart fast asleep, side by side with a Cat.

I found myself thinking like Leveza, and said to Grama. "I can't aim a gun. You better keep watch."

So I ended up pulling the cart alone, while Grama stood in the wagon with a gun, and I didn't know which one of us was the biggest target.

The slope steepened, and we entered a gully, a dry wash between crags. The wind changed direction constantly, buffeting us with the scent of Cat.

"They're back," I said to Grama.

The scent woke up Leveza. "Thank you," she said. "The two of you should go join the others." She dropped heavily down out of the cart. She searched me with her eyes, some kind of apology in them. "Choova's alone."

Grama's chin tapped me twice. Leveza was right. As we climbed together uphill toward the herd, I said, "Cats don't go out of their territory."

"They're following Leveza. They want Mai, they want her." In other words, Leveza was pulling the Cats with her.

"Don't tell the others," I said.

The wall of faces above us on the hill opened up to admit us, and then closed again behind. We found Choova, who had been having fun with playmates. She'd forgotten Cats, Leveza, everything, and was full of giggles and teasing, pulling my mane. As we walked, the herd gradually caught up with Leveza, and we could hear her and the Cat murmuring to each other.

"What on earth do they find to talk about?" said Raio, my cousin.

"How delicious horseflesh is," said Ventoo.

Choova scowled. "Everybody says that Leveza is bad." I stroked her and tried to explain it and found that I could not. All I could say was, "Leveza wants to learn."

The trail crossed a stream and Fortchee signaled a break. Leveza's cart was already there with Leveza still in harness reaching down to drink. The trickling sound of safe, shallow water triggered a rush. We crowded round the creek, leaning down and thrusting each other's head out of the way. Grama trotted up the hill to make room and found herself the farthest one out, the most exposed. I was about to say, *Grama get back*.

Three Cats pounced on her. The entire herd pulled back and away from her, swiftly, like smoke blown by wind. Two Cats gripped her hind legs; one was trying to tear out her throat. She was dead, Grama was dead, I was sure of it. I kept leaping forward and back in some kind of impulse to help. Then came a crackle of gunfire. The two Cats on her hindquarters yowled and were thrown back. One spun away and ran; one flipped over backward and was still.

Then one miraculous shot: it sliced through the Cat in front without touching Grama. I looked back in the cart and saw that Leveza had been held down in harness, unable to stand up or reach for her gun.

In the back of the wagon, head and rifle over the sides, was Mother Cat.

Grama shook and shivered, her whole hide twitching independently from the muscles underneath, her eyes ringed round with white. She wasn't even breathing, she was so panicked. I knew exactly how awful that felt. I ronfled the comfort sound over and over as I picked my way to her, touched her. She heaved a huge, painful-sounding breath. I got hold of the back of her neck. "Come on darling, come on baby," I said through clenched teeth. I coaxed her back downstream toward the others. Her rattling breath came in sobs.

There were no sympathy nitters. The other Horses actually pulled back from us as if we carried live flame. Grama nodded that she was all right and I let her go. She still shivered, but she stepped gently back and forth to test her torn rear legs. I lifted the healer's pack from her shoulders and took out the bark water to wash her.

I was angry at the others and shouted at them. "It's all right, all of you, leave her be. Just leave her alone. She's nursed you often enough."

Fortchee stepped toward us, breathed in her scent to see how badly hurt she was.

Then he looked over in the direction of the Cat, who still held the gun. He calmly turned and walked toward the cart. Leveza had finally succeeded in slipping out of the yoke and begun to climb the hill back toward him.

I tried to coax Grama back to our wagons, but she firmly shook her head. She wanted to listen to what Fortchee said.

I couldn't quite hear him, but I certainly could hear Leveza. "She has just as much reason to escape them as you do!"

Fortchee's voice went harsher, giving an order.

"No," said Leveza. He said something else, and Leveza replied. "It seems she's done a good job of protecting us."

His voice was loud. "Out, now! You or her or both of you."

"I'm already out. Haven't you noticed?"

She stepped back toward the long neck of the cart and slammed back on the yoke. "I don't need you, and I don't have you!"

She wrenched herself round, almost dragging the cart sideways, turning it down to follow the stream itself. Fortchee shouted for a break. "*Afriradors*, guard everyone while they drink." To my surprise, Grama began to limp as fast as she could after Leveza's wagon.

I couldn't let her go alone, so I followed, taking Choova with me. As we trooped down the hill, we passed Fortchee trudging up the slope, his head hanging. He ignored us. A Head Man cannot afford to be defied to his face too often.

I caught up to Grama. We hobbled over rocks, or splashed through shallow pools. Choova rubbed her chin against my flank for comfort. Leveza saw us behind her and stopped.

"Hello, darling," Leveza called back to Choova, who clattered forward, glad to see her. They interlaced their heads, breathed each other's breath. I pressed in close, and felt my eyes sting. We were still a family.

Grama stuck her head over the sides of the wagon. "Thank you," she told Mai.

"You nursed me," said the Cat.

“Mai?” said Leveza. “This is my groom-daughter Choova.”

“Choova,” said the Cat and smiled, and crawled up the wagon to be nearer. “I have a boy, Choova, a little boy.” Choova looked uncertain and edged back.

“Is he back ... with the pride?” Leveza asked.

“Yesh. But he won’t want to know me now.” Mai slumped back down in the wagon. “Everything with us is the hunt. Nobody thinks about anything else.” She shrugged. “He’s getting mature now, he would have been driven off soon anyway.”

Leveza stopped pulling. “You should drink some water.”

As slow as molten metal, the Cat poured herself out of the cart, halting on tender paws. She drank, but not enough, looked weary, and then wove her unsteady way back toward the wagon. She started to laugh. “I can’t get back in.”

Leveza slipped out of harness and we all helped roll Mai onto Leveza’s back. Grama sprang back up into the cart, and helped pull up the Cat.

“Good to be among friends,” Mai whispered.

Leveza stroked her head. “Neither one of us can go back home,” she said, staring at Mai with a sad smile. Then she looked at me, with an expression that seemed to say, I think she’s going to die.

I wanted to say, I’m supposed to care about a Cat?

“Don’t you get pushed out too,” she said to me, and jerked her head in the direction of the herd. She asked us to bring her lots of lamp fuel, and Grama promised that she would. As we walked toward the others, I couldn’t stop myself saying in front of Choova. “She’s in love with that bloody Cat!”

* * * *

That night, Choova, me and Grama slept together again beneath a wagon, behind the windbreak wall.

In the middle of the night, we heard burrowing and saw claws, digging

underneath the timbers, trying to get in. We jammed little stakes into the tender places between their toes. I cradled Choova next to me as we heard shots from overhead and Cat cries. We saw flickering light through the boards and smelled smoke. Fortchee stuck his head underneath the wagon. "Leveza's set the hillside on fire! We have to beat it back." He looked wild. "Come on! There's no more Cats but the camp's catching fire!" He head-butted Ventoo. "We need everyone!"

Light on the opposite hillside left dim blue and gray shadows across our eyes. Fire rained slowly down, embers from the grass, drifting sparks. Ash tickled our nostrils; we couldn't quite see. We had fuel and firestarters on the wagons; if those caught alight we'd lose everything.

"That bloody woman!" shouted Ventoo. Blindly, we got out blankets and started to beat back the grass fire, aiming for any blur of light. The men stumbled down the stream with buckets to fill, stepping blindly into dark, wondering if Cats awaited them. The ground sizzled, steamed, and trailed smoke. We slapped wet blankets onto the gnawing red lines in the wood.

It was still milklight, and the fire had not burnt out, when Fortchee called for us to pack up and march. Blearily, we hoisted up the windbreak walls, only too happy to move. The smell of ash was making us ill. I glanced up and saw that Leveza had already gone.

Butt her! I thought. My own milk had given out on the trek, and Choova was hungry. What do you have a groom-mate for if not to help nurse your child? "You'll have to graze, baby," I told her.

We churned up clouds of ash. I wandered though something crisp and tangled and realized I had trodden in the burnt carcass of a Cat. Later in the grass we saw the quail that Leveza had shot, thrown away, the meat gone dark and dry. The Cat still had not eaten.

"I want to see if Mai's all right," said Grama.

In full milklight, we trotted ahead to the wagon to find the Cat asleep and Leveza hauling the wagon on two legs only, keeping watch with the rifle ready. She passed us the gun and settled down onto all fours and started to haul again. Her face and voice were stern. "She says it would be possible to bring Horses back, full-blooded Horses. Can you imagine? They could have something else to eat, all of this could stop!"

"What? How?" said Grama.

“The Ancestors wanted to be able to bring both back. We have the complete information for Horses and Ancestors too. We still carry them inside us!”

“So ... what do we do?” Grama asked.

“Bee-sh,” said a voice from the cart. The Cat sat up, with a clown’s expression on her face. She chuckled. “You could carry them forever, and they wouldn’t come out. They need something from Bees.”

For some reason, Leveza chuckled too. She was always so serious and weighty that I could never make her laugh.

“It’s called....” The Cat paused and then wiggled her eyebrows. “*Ek-die-ssshone*.” She paused. “That-ssh a word. I don’t know what it mean-sh either. It’s just in my head.”

That Cat knew her toothless voice was funny. She was playing up to it. I saw then how clever she was, how clever she had been. She knew just what to say to get Leveza on her side.

“Bee-sh make honey, and bee-sh make Horshes.”

“So you give the seed something from bees, and we give birth to full-bloods?” Everything about Grama stood up alert and turned toward the Cat.

“Not you too,” I moaned.

Finally I made Leveza laugh. “Oh Akwa, you old chestnut!”

“No,” said the Cat. “What gets born is much, much closer to Horses. It’s a mix of you and a full-blooded Horse, but then we can...”

“Breed back!” said Grama. “Just pair off the right ones.”

“Yup,” said the Cat. “I’ve alsway-sssh thought I could do it. I jussht needed lotsh of Horshes. My pridemates had sschtrong tendenshee to eat them.”

There was something deadly in Leveza’s calm. “We could bring back the Ancestors. Imagine what they could tell us! Maybe they have all the memory sticks, all together.”

The Cat leaned back, her work done. "They knew nothing. They had no memory. Everything they knew, they had to learn. How to walk. How to talk. All over again each time. So they could forget. But they could learn."

Overhead the stars looked like a giant spider's web, all glistening with dew.

"They wanted to travel to the stars. So they thought they would carry the animals and plants inside them. And they were worried that all their knowledge would be lost. How, they asked, can we make the information safe? So they made it like the knowledge every spider has: how to weave a web."

"Kaway," said Leveza, in a mourning voice.

I felt as though I had gone to sleep on the ground all alone instead of sleeping on my feet to watch. This was madness, just the kind of madness to capture Leveza. I will keep watch now, I promised myself.

"Maybe one day the Ancestors will sail back." Leveza arched her neck and looked up at the stars.

All the next day, as we headed east, they talked their nonsense. Nowadays, I wish that I had listened and could remember it, but all I heard then was that the Cat was subverting my Leveza. I knew it was no good pleading with her to let all of this madness alone, to come home, to be as we were. How I wanted that Cat to die. I've never felt so alone and useless.

"Don't worry, love," said Grama. "It's Leveza's way."

I was too angry to answer.

The stream dipped down through green hills which suddenly fell away. We stopped at the top of a slope, looking out over a turquoise and gray plain. We had made it to the eastern slopes facing the sea. The grass was long and soft and rich, so we grazed as we walked, and I hoped my milk would come back. The foals, Choova included, began to run up and down through the meadows as if already home. We'd made it; we would be fine.

Fortchee kept pushing us, getting us well out of the Cats' range. Still, it was strange; this was flatlands, full of tall grass. Why were there no other Cats? I kept sniffing the wind, we all did, but all we smelled was the pure fresh smell of grazing.

It was not until near sunset that Fortchee brayed for camp. Grama and I went back, and I kicked the grass as I walked. Grama chewed my mane and called me poor love. “She’s always loved ideas. The Cat is full of them.”

“Yes, she wants us to make new children to feed to her!” I pulled Choova closer to me and nuzzled her.

We camped, grazed, and watered, but I couldn’t settle. I paced round and round. I went back to our wagon, slumped down, and tried to feed Choova again. I couldn’t. I wept. I was dry like old grass, and I had no one to help me and felt alone, abandoned. I heard Leveza start to sing! Sing, while sleeping with a Cat. She was blank, unfeeling, something restraining had been left out of her. She didn’t love me, she didn’t love anything. Just her fabrications. And she’d pulled me and used me up and left me alone.

Choova was restless too. For a while, getting her to sleep occupied me. Finally her breathing fell regular, soft and smelling of hay, sweet and young and trusting, her long slim face resting on my haunches.

I lay there and heard Leveza sing the songs about sunrise, pasture, running through fields, the kinds of songs you sing when you are excited, young.

In love.

Sleep wouldn’t come, peace wouldn’t come. I turned over and Choova stirred, Grama groaned. I was keeping them awake. Suddenly I was determined to bring all of this to a stop. I was going to go out there and get my groom-mate back. So I rolled quietly out from under the wagon. Everything was still; even birds and insects—no stars, no moon. Yet I thought I heard ... something.

I reared up to look over the windbreaks and saw light over the horizon, and drifting white smoke. I thought it was the last of the fire then realized it was in the wrong direction. Did I hear shots? And mewling?

I was about to give the danger call when Fortchee stepped up to me. “*Fuhfuhfoom*,” he said, the quiet call. “That’s Cat fighting Cat. The ones chasing us have strayed into another pride’s territory.”

I felt ice on our shoulders. We stood and watched and listened and our focusing ears seemed to pull the sound closer to us.

A battle between Cats.

“We can sleep on a little longer in safety,” he said. “I had to tell Leveza to stop singing.”

I started to walk. “I need to talk sense to that woman.”

“Good luck.” He pulled a cart aside, to make a gap for me. “Be careful anyway.”

As I walked toward the wagon the sound grew, a growling, roaring, crying, a sound like a creeping wildfire. It was as if all the world had gone mad along with me.

I slipped down the track, silently, rehearsing what I would say to her. I would tell her to come back to Choova and the herd and let the Cat do what it could to survive. I would tell her: You choose. Me or that Cat. I would force her to come back, force her to be sensible.

I got halfway down the track, and clouds moved away from the moon, and I saw.

At first I thought Leveza was just grooming her. That would have been enough to make me sick, the thought of grooming something that smelt of death, of blood.

But it wasn't grooming. The Cat had not eaten for days, was wounded and hungry, and Leveza had leaking tits.

I saw her suckling a Cat.

The Earth spun. I had never known that such perversion existed; I'd never heard of normal groom-mates doing such a thing. But what a fearful confounding was this, of species, of mother, of child? While my Choova starved, that Cat, that monster, was being fed, given horsemilk as if by a loving mother.

I gagged and made a little cry and stumbled and coughed and I think those two in the wagon turned and saw me. I spun around and galloped, hooves pounding, and I was calling over and over “Foul, foul, foul!”

I wailed and I heard answering shouts from inside the camp. Ventoo and Lindalfa came hobbling out to me.

“Akwa, darling!”

“Akwa, what’s wrong?”

They were mean-eyed. “What’s *she* done now?” They were yearning for bad news about Leveza

I wept and wailed and tried to pull myself away. “She won’t feed Choova but she’s feeding that Cat.”

“What do you mean, feed?”

I couldn’t answer.

“Hunting! Yes we saw! Killing for that thing!”

“Foul, yes, poor Akwa!”

I hauled in a breath that pushed my voice box the wrong way.

“It’s not hunting!” I was frothing at the mouth, the spittle and foam splayed over my lips and chin. “Uhhhhh!”

I wished the grass would slash her like a thousand needles. I wanted hot embers poured down her throat, I wanted her consumed, I wanted the Cats to come and make good all their terrible threats. Yes, yes, eat your Cat lover and then be eaten too. Call for me and I will call back to you: *You deserve this!*

Gramma was there. “Akwa, calm down. Down, Akwa.” She ronfled the soothing noise. I blew out spittle at her, rejecting the trigger from my belly outward. I shriek-whinnied in a mixture of fear, horror, and something like the sickness call.

“She’s suckling the Cat!”

Silence.

Someone giggled.

I head-butted the person I thought had laughed. “Suckling. An adult. Cat!”

Grama fell silent. I shouted at her. "Heard of that before, Midwife?" My eyes were round; my teeth were shovels for flesh; I was enraged at everything and everyone.

Grama stepped back. Fortchee stepped forward. "What is all this noise?"

I told him. I told him good, I told him long. Ventoo bit my tail to keep me in place; the others rubbed me with their snouts.

"Poor thing! Her groom-mate."

"Enough," said Fortchee. He turned and started to walk toward their wagon.

"Too true there!" said Ventoo. Old Pronto grabbed a gun.

We all followed, making a sound like a slow small rockslide, down toward the cart.

Leveza stood up in the wagon, waiting. So did the Cat.

"Give us your guns," said Fortchee.

"We can't...."

"I'm not asking, I'm ordering."

Leveza looked at him, as if moonlight still shone on his face. She sighed, and looked up at the stars, and handed him her gun.

"The Cat's too."

Silently Leveza held it out to him.

"Now get down out of that cart and rejoin the herd."

"And Mai?" Such regret, such fondness, such concern for blood-breathed Cat.

The spittle curdled; the heart shriveled; I tasted gall, and I said, "She's taken a Cat for a groom-mate. I don't want her! I don't want her back!"

Her head jerked up at me in wonder.

“All her fabricating!”

I felt myself rear up in the air, and I bucked. I bucked to get away from my own heart, from the things I'd seen, for the way I'd been stretched. I was tired, I was frightened, I wanted her to be as we had been. Our girlhoods when we galloped beribboned over the hill.

“She'd feed my child to that bloody Cat!”

Reared up, wrenching, I made a noise I had never heard before, never knew could be made.

It was like giving birth through the throat, some ghastly wriggling thing made of sound that needed to be born, and it came out of me, headless and blind. A relentless, howling pushing-back that flecked everything with foam as if I were the sea.

Triggered.

Even Fortchee.

All.

We all moved together, closing like a gate. Our shoulders touched and our haunches. We lowered our heads. We advanced. I saw Leveza look into my eyes and then crumple. She knew what this was, even if I did not, and she knew it had come from me.

We advanced and butted the cart. We pushed all our heads under it and turned the cart over. Leveza and the Cat had to jump out, clumsy, stumbling to find their feet.

The Cat snarled, toothless. Leveza shook her head. “Friends....”

We were deaf. We were upon them. We head-butted them. Leveza slipped backward, onto her knees. Fortchee reared up and clubbed her on the head with his hooves. She stood up, turned. Fortchee, Ventoo, Raio, Pronto, all bared their teeth and bit her buttocks hard. Feet splaying sideways, she began to run.

The Cat bounded, faster in bursts than Leveza was, and leapt up onto her back. Leveza trotted away, carrying her. Her tail waved, defiant. Then

milklight closed over them as if they had sunk. We heard light scattering sounds of stones for a while, then even her hoofbeats faded into the whispering sound of spaces between mountains.

Without a word, Grama sprang after them. I saw her go too. There were no Cats on the plain to seize them as the horizon burned.

The herd swung to the left in absolute unison, wheeling around, and then trotted back to the camp. We felt satisfied, strangely nourished, safe and content. I looked back under the cart. Choova raised her head. "What was that, Mummy?"

"Nothing, love, nothing," I said.

Fortchee told us quietly that we should get moving now while the Cats were occupied. We dismantled the windbreaks and packed the tools. Some of the men turned Leveza's cart upright and old Pronto went back to his post in harness. Never did we pack with so little noise, so swiftly, calmly. Nothing was said at all, no mention of it. The horizon burned with someone else's passion.

Choova ran out to graze, her mane bobbing. She never asked about Leveza or Grama, not once, ever. A soft glowing light spread wide across the pampas.

* * * *

We followed the stream to the sea and then migrated along the sand. It got between our fingers. We did see the turtles. I would have asked them about acids, especially the acids in batteries, but they were laying eggs, and would have been fearful.

Fortchee led us to a wonderful pasture, far to the south, on a lake next to sea, salt and fresh water so close, beside tall sudden cliffs that kept Cats at bay. Oats grew there year round; the rains never left. By digging we found rust shoals, thick layers of it, enough to make metal for several lifetimes. There was no reason to leave. We waited for the trigger to leave, but year in, year out, none came.

Fortchee had us build a stone wall across the small peninsula of land that connected our islet to the mainland, and we were safe from Cats. When he died, we called him our greatest innovator.

On top of a high hill we found the fallen statue of an Ancestor, his

face melted, his arms outstretched. As if to welcome Ancestors back from the stars.

No one came to me in the night to comfort me or bite my neck and call me love. I suppose I'd been touched by something strange and so was strange myself. I would have taken a low-rank drifter, only they did not get past the wall. Still, I had my Choova. She brought me her children to bless, and then her grandchildren, though they never really recognized what I was to them. Their children had no idea that I still lived. My loneliness creaked worse than my joints and I yearned for a migration, to sweep me numbly away.

Not once did anyone speak of Leveza, or even once remember her. Our exiled groom-brothers would drift by, to temporarily gladsome cries, and they told us, before moving on, of new wonders on the prairie. But we blanked that too.

Until one dusk, I saw the strangest thing picking its way down toward our lagoon.

It looked like a fine and handsome young girl, beautifully formed though very very long in the trunk. She raised her head from drinking and her mane fell back. The top of her face was missing, from right above the eyes. It was terrible to see, someone so young but so deformed. She whinnied in hope and fear, and I ronfled back comfort to her, and then asked her name. But she couldn't talk.

A horse. I was looking at a full-blooded horse. I felt a chill on my legs and wondered: did they bring the Ancestors back, too?

"Leveza?" I asked it, and it raised and lowered its head, and I thought the creature knew the name. It suddenly took fright, started, and trotted away into the night, as someone else once had.

Then there was a sound like thousands of cards being shuffled, and a score of the creatures emerged from the trees. They bent their long necks down to drink. Their legs worked backward.

A voice said softly, "Is that Akwa?" Against a contrast sky, I saw the silhouette of a monster, two headed, tall. Then I recognized the gun.

She had trained one of the things to carry her, so she would always sit tall and have her hands free. I couldn't speak. Somewhere beyond the trees carts rumbled.

“Hello my love,” she said. I was hemorrhaging memory, a continual stream; and all of it about her—how she spoke, how she smelled, how she always went too far, and how I wished that I’d gone with her too all those years ago.

“We’re going south, to find the Bears, get us some of that writing. Want to come?” I still could not speak. “It’s perfectly safe. We’ve bought along something else for them to eat.”

I think that word “safe” was the trigger. I did the giggle of embarrassment and fear. I drank sweet water and then followed. We found writing, and here it is.